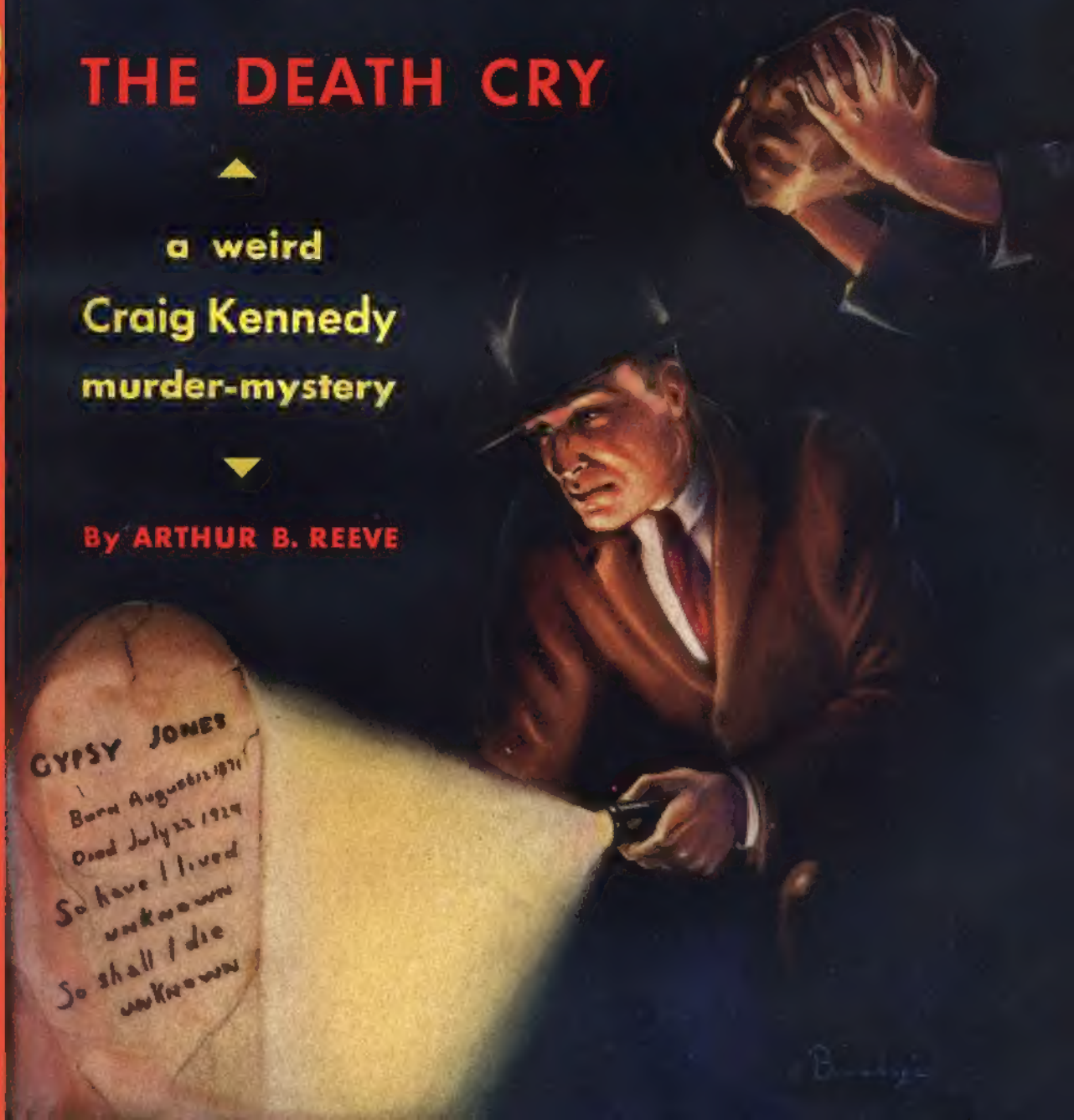
MAY 25c

Weird Tales

THE DEATH CRY

a weird
Craig Kennedy
murder-mystery

By ARTHUR B. REEVE



MAY, 1935
WEIRD TALES
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COMING NEXT MONTH

THE circumstances under which I first encountered Prince Satan were, to say the least, very weird. The method of introduction was quite in keeping with Satan's habits; for the first thing I saw after one brief glance into his black, hypnotic eyes, glowing like coals in the darkness, was the slender, blackened muzzle of what was probably the most deadly ray-gun in the entire universe.

Naturally, Prince Satan himself was no stranger to me—I mean by reputation—for I had read and heard of the almost unbelievable exploits of this exile of space whose name was breathed in fearful whispers in every inhabited portion of three planets. Being young and having a flair for adventure myself, I had followed this amazing outlaw's career with increasing interest, from his first daring flirtations with death as a nameless and strangely crippled space bandit, until his continual brazen escapades were the common gossip of our tri-world civilization.

Yet this fearless buccaneer of the void was to me, as to the populace at large, more or less a half-legendary and almost supernatural figure—something entirely apart from my rather commonplace existence.

If anyone had told me, earlier that fateful day, that I should soon stand face to face with Prince Satan himself, and talk to him as he rested comfortably in my study, I should have laughed at the impossibility of such an encounter. Yet I did meet Satan that day; and not only on that one memorable occasion, but for many a similar rendezvous during the years to follow.

And though he may be branded as a ruthless villain, aye, murderer too, by the three worlds, I still say that, had it been possible for me to do so, I would gladly have given my own life to spare his—that of the most remarkable of all men—when the Code at last exacted from him its penalty. . . .

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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"From somewhere in the depths of that great hotel came a wailing cry."

The Death Cry

By ARTHUR B. REEVE

A sensational weird detective murder-mystery, featuring Craig Kennedy

1. Death Screams Once

THE Three Pines Hotel stood high on the mountainside in the heart of the Catskills, a gaunt and rambling structure that loomed ghost-like and white in the night. Moonlight filtered weakly through the great pines that towered over it; and this moonlight—bluish haze in the night—gave the hotel a weird and forbidding aspect.

It was the third week of the summer season; yet from the hotel came no music

or laughter, no animation or gayety such as in years past in summer seasons. The low structure with its several wings stood silent and grim in the night. Lights shone from a few of its windows, but the lights seemed lifeless; and over the great white rambling building a shroud of impenetrable silence seemed to hang. Encompassing this shroud of silence was the sense of some indefinable dread, stark and ominous and eery.

Craig Kennedy brought his roadster to an abrupt stop in front of the hotel.

The big wide veranda was lighted, but no one sat in any of the numerous chairs scattered over it. Lights came from the first-floor windows. On the second floor a window here and there was lighted, but most of them were dark.

Kennedy stepped out of his roadster and stood in the shadows of the trees along the road. For some time he remained immovable, his body tense and his eyes on the second-floor windows.

Suddenly he caught his breath. A window in the upper part of the building opened. It was the window of an unlighted room. The dull scraping of the frame going up broke the stillness of the night. In the moonlight Kennedy could see the white outline of the window as it went up slowly.

The long, dark form of a man—or was it a woman?—protruded far out the window. The hands went down to the ledge that ran along the front of the hotel beneath the second-floor windows. Someone walked out on the porch. The dark form darted back into the darkened room. The window thudded down.

Kennedy shrugged and walked across the road and up on the porch. The person who had come out on the porch was gone. Kennedy went directly into the lobby and up to the desk.

A tall, pale-faced man with the air and the voice and the clothes of a successful hotel clerk stood behind the desk.

● The name of Craig Kennedy is as well known to readers of detective fiction as is Sherlock Holmes. But never before have Kennedy's great deductive powers been employed in a murder mystery so weird and creepy as this unusual novelette. One after another, guests at the Three Pines Hotel are mysteriously murdered under circumstances suggesting vampirism; but the murders have a perfectly natural explanation. We challenge you to guess the solution of this baffling mystery before the author reveals it to you.

"The manager of the hotel, Mr. Condon," said Kennedy. "I have an appointment with him."

The eyes of the clerk appraised Kennedy coldly. "You—you are Mr. Kennedy?"

Kennedy nodded.

"Ah—then, Mr. Kennedy, you may go right up into Mr. Condon's private office. He is waiting for you. First door, right."

Kennedy turned and started for the door to the right. He looked around the lobby. Everything about it bespoke luxury and comfort. A few people were sitting in chairs, staring silently at him. Their faces were set and drawn; they had little of the demeanor or ease of guests of an exclusive summer hotel.

KENNEDY opened the door to the manager's office. A young man, not far past thirty, sat behind a desk. His face was frank and pleasant-looking, though there were lines on it from worry and lack of sleep.

"Kennedy!" he exclaimed as he got up

quickly and rushed to meet him. "I'm glad you've come!"

Craig took his hand, smiled, then sat down on the desk.

"Yes, Condon, thanks! The head office of the hotel in the city asked me to get up here as quickly as I could. What's happened? Your place looks like a funeral parlor!"

"It will be a cemetery in another week if things don't change!" exclaimed Condon. "Did they tell you anything yet?"

"Only to get up here as quickly as I could and find out what was the trouble, cost what it might. No; they gave me no particular information. Said it would come better from you."

Condon sat down wearily.

"I guess maybe," he said, "it mightn't have got under my skin so much if it wasn't that this is my first year as manager. And it looks as if it will be my last."

"Oh, come now," broke in Kennedy. "There may be someone who wants this to be your last year."

Condon merely shook his head.

"I'll give you an idea of what has happened. The season opened with every prospect of a big summer. The hotel filled rapidly. Then on Thursday of the first week came the first intimation of what was to come. It was a trivial thing and I thought nothing of it at the time.

"Miss Worthington, an old maid, was awakened about three in the morning by the sound of someone in her room. Miss Worthington is very hysterical and she ran out in the hallway screaming, woke up all the other guests. We investigated but could find no evidence of anyone having been in her room. I put it down to a bad dream. But the following night George Branford, an old guest, complained that someone was in his room.

"Branford didn't make much of a scene, but he did tell the other people. Of course Miss Worthington talked about nothing but the man in her room. At first the guests took it as a joke. But when Branford told his story, people began to get puzzled. You know, Kennedy, how such things grow with the telling. In a few days Miss Worthington had been attacked—and Branford's life had been threatened, so it seemed.

"Well, five days passed and nothing happened. Then came that ungodly scream. I heard it. Everyone in the hotel heard it. I can't describe it. It was inhuman, terrifying. It lasted for a full minute. Coming as it did in the dead of night and waking everybody from sleep, it was nerve-racking in view of the nervous state of the guests already.

"This week, Kennedy, it came again! Philip Coulter, an old guest of the hotel, was awakened by someone moving in the dark. But when he turned on the lights he was the only person in the room. Yet on the bed-clothes there was blood! He felt his neck. There was blood there!

"Now, the strange part of all this. Coulter's door was locked and bolted from the inside. No key could have moved that night bolt. His window was up only a few inches. There is a ledge along the front of the building. But this ledge is only a few inches wide, and round on the top. Only a bird could have walked this ledge. How that person entered Coulter's room is the greatest mystery of the whole thing."

Kennedy merely shrugged. It was obvious why they had said nothing at the city office. "I see. The scream and the attack on this man Coulter have driven away all your guests."

"All but eight," nodded Condon wearily. "Just eight left—and we are right in the middle of the season."

"You have checked up on all the

guests?" suggested Kennedy. "You are sure none of them was behind these queer things?"

"We've checked every one and we've searched every inch of this hotel," Condon replied positively. "We have no idea where the scream comes from or who is behind it. Neither can we explain the blood on Coulter's bed-clothes. Frankly, we are completely stumped."

"Any queer guests?" queried Kennedy.

Condon smiled.

"You always have odd characters in a summer hotel. We have Madam Certi with us now."

"Madam Certi? Who is she?"

"A very fine old lady who talks with the dead. She claims to be a great spiritualist, but really is a very sweet and very fine old lady."

"I see," noted Kennedy dryly. "She is still here?"

"Yes; all the screams and other things have worried her very little."

"Any other peculiar guests?"

"Professor Mundo is a queer old character. Claims to be a great scientist."

"You have checked up on these two people?"

"In every detail, I'd say. They could have had nothing to do with the presence of someone in the different rooms or the screams."

"This scream," Kennedy remarked thoughtfully, "what do you make of it yourself? You're worldly-wise, Condon."

Condon actually shuddered. "It's the most ungodly thing, Kennedy, you ever heard! So damnably ungodly that if you once hear it, you'll never be able to forget it—or describe it."

Kennedy smiled and Condon flushed with resentment.

"You may laugh at me, Kennedy, but——" he checked himself. "I don't know what is behind all of it. But I am convinced an attempt was made to murder Coulter. How or by what means I don't know—unless someone was trying to choke him and he woke up."

Kennedy passed it by. "Let's get down to business, Condon. Where does this scream come from, in your opinion?"

"Why, it usually——"

CONDON never finished the sentence. From somewhere in the depths of that great hotel came a wailing cry. It started low and dismal; a chanting wail, weird and unearthly. Then it increased in volume until it was a screeching, hideous scream, like neither human being nor animal.

All color fled from Condon's face. He raised himself in his chair, trembling. "My God!" he cried hoarsely. "Talk of the devil—there it is now!"

Kennedy with a leap was out of his own chair and out in the deserted lobby. The unearthly scream was dying away slowly. It was coming from somewhere on the second floor, apparently. Kennedy was up the stairs, two steps at a time.

A man was running down the hallway. Kennedy recognized him as the pale-faced clerk down at the desk. His eyes were wild and his lower lip was twitching.

"God, man!" he cried. "It came from Mr. Coulter's room!"

An old man, small and wizened, dressed in the uniform of a hotel porter, joined them. He looked at the clerk and at Kennedy a bit stupidly, then started for Coulter's room on a dog-trot.

Kennedy and the clerk followed. At room 256 the old man tried the door. It was locked. He shouted. No answer. The clerk fumbled nervously for his pass-key but couldn't find it. Kennedy shoved him aside and tried the door with his shoulder. It didn't give. He backed

away and threw his body against it. It crashed—and he catapulted into the room with it.

When Kennedy got to his feet he looked around. His body stiffened and a whispered oath escaped his lips.

Lying face down on the floor, his neck covered with blood, was a gray-haired man. The bed-clothes were still wrapped around his pajama-clad body.

Kennedy turned the body over.

The face of the man was blue and distorted as if he had died in either great pain or great fear.

That moment Condon came rushing into the room.

"Anything happen?" he was crying breathlessly.

"This old man," returned Kennedy, taking his hand off the heart, "has been murdered!"

"Murdered?" repeated Condon, aghast. "Mr. Coulter!"

2. *The Clue of the Leather*

KENNEDY lost no time getting into action. He sent Condon and the clerk to check up on every person in the hotel. Then he sent the old servant, whose name was Peter, to get the keys to the two suites adjoining that of the murdered man.

Next Kennedy made a rapid but thorough examination of the murder suite. The bedroom where the body of Coulter lay on the floor, with the bed-clothes still wrapped about his legs just as he had either crawled or been pulled out of the bed, was the second room of the suite. The other was smaller, apparently a study. There was a desk in it, a large number of books, and a couple of easy-chairs.

Quick investigation showed nothing that interested Kennedy much except that the windows of the study were locked. He turned back into the bedroom and noted that the door he had crashed had a night bolt on it, and that the bolt had been slipped closed evidently when he crashed the door in.

The windows to the bedroom were up, but one look out of the windows convinced Kennedy that it would have been a physical impossibility for anyone to walk along the ledge below them. The ledge was less than two inches wide, and the top of it was round. The transom to the hall was closed. Apparently, a careful examination of the window, the door and the floor gave no clue as to how the murderer had entered the room.

Then Kennedy turned his attention to the dead man. He brushed some of the blood away from the jugular vein. Under the blood near the base of the throat he saw something that made the lines of his face tighten. There were two little holes —no larger than a pin-point and about half an inch apart. They were black, and apparently the blood on the dead man's throat had come from them.

For some moments Kennedy studied these little holes. Then he stood up, his eyes still staring at the face of the murdered man. His own face was hard and tense; two little lines formed around his mouth.

He looked at the broken door, at the night bolt that had been slipped on, and the closed transom; he turned his face slowly and studied the open windows. His lower lip was sucked in between his teeth. Suddenly it came out with a subdued flop.

He turned and walked deliberately back into the study.

SEIZING the telephone, Kennedy put in a call for the sheriff of the county. It was some minutes before he got him.

"Sheriff," Kennedy shot out in sharp staccato, "this is Craig Kennedy, of New

York City. There's been a murder up at the Three Pines Hotel. Bring a couple of men with you. We'll need them. And the coroner. If you can't get the coroner right away, bring a good doctor along. And I can use a good fingerprint man if you have one available."

He hung up and walked back into the bedroom.

Condon was standing in the door; old Peter was with him.

"Have—have you found anything, Kennedy?" asked Condon hoarsely. "I have all the guests rounded up in the lobby downstairs."

"I've just called the sheriff, Condon," replied Kennedy. "He'll be over at once."

Condon's youthful face wore a positively frightened look which suddenly turned to consternation.

"The sheriff?" he repeated. "Man, isn't it enough to have this happen without broadcasting——"

"Condon," retorted Kennedy sternly, "this is murder—hotel business or no hotel business. Have you the keys to the adjoining rooms?"

"I suppose you're right," muttered Condon. "Here they are."

Kennedy turned to old Peter, whose mouth was gaping with terror, his eyes riveted on the body on the floor.

"Stay at this door, Peter," ordered Kennedy. "Condon, you and I are going to have a look at these rooms."

Old Peter muttered a protest which Kennedy ignored as he turned to the adjoining suite to the right.

It was a small room and had been vacant a week. There was no connecting door to the Coulter suite.

Examination netted nothing. The window was down and locked. There were no indications that anyone had been in the room since it had been vacated.

"That other suite to the left," explained Condon as Kennedy turned to it, "is occupied by a young married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Pilcher. They took it the first week of the season and remained. They're downstairs. You can go in—on your own responsibility."

"I'll take it," decided Kennedy.

The Pilcher suite was laid out in similar manner to the Coulter suite, a bedroom and a second room, in their case a lounging-room, feminine in every detail.

Kennedy examined the furniture carefully, then went over to the window. It was wide open. This window was next to the bedroom where Coulter had been murdered. He looked back. The transom of the hall door was open.

"What do you know about this couple?" asked Kennedy.

"Nothing more than that they have been guests since we opened, and appear to be very pleasant young people. They seem to have plenty of money and to be well connected in the city."

Kennedy nodded but said nothing. He walked into the lounging-room. Two glasses half-filled with liquor were on a table by a chaise-longue; a cigarette was still smoldering in an ash-tray.

"The Pilchers were up here when the murder was committed," Kennedy remarked. "Did they hear anything?"

"I talked to both of them," Condon replied. "The first thing they heard was the scream."

Kennedy walked back into the bedroom. Over by the door he picked up a small piece of black leather. He looked at it, then smiled.

"That's interesting," he muttered. "Come back to Coulter's room."

Condon looked at the piece of leather, his face a blank. Then he followed Kennedy out of the room.

Old Peter was still guarding the death

room, his body atremble and his face colorless. Kennedy walked deliberately over to the head of the bed and pointed down at the floor.

"I left that piece of leather on the floor for a reason," he said. "I'm glad I did, now. If you will look closely, you will see that this piece in my hand corresponds to the piece on the floor."

Condon looked down. Lying near the bed was a piece of black leather about an inch wide and perhaps an inch and a half long. A piece had been torn from one end of it, and the leather in Kennedy's hand corresponded to the part torn off.

Condon shook his head wearily. "I don't understand it. The door was locked and bolted from the inside. No chance to get through the windows. How did the murderer get in?"

"That," said Kennedy, "is what I'm figuring out."

"Simply couldn't be done," Condon asserted, "unless the murderer flew through the window."

"Oh," Kennedy retorted, "just exercise your imagination."

Condon was about to reply, but he no more than framed his lips. The scream of a woman out in the hallway sent both Kennedy and himself in a rush to the door.

HER hair down and streaming behind her, her face distorted with fear, a tall woman, very tall and very slim, arms outstretched, was running wildly.

"Miss Worthington!" Condon cried. "What's happened?"

"Oh—oh—oh!" she wailed. "I saw it! I saw it!"

"Saw what?" demanded Kennedy.

"I saw it! A great big black *thing!* It came after me. Oh!"

"Miss Worthington," Condon soothed, "if you have seen anything or know anything, calm yourself. You must tell Mr. Kennedy. He's a detective."

"A detective!" The words came from the old maid's mouth in an awed whisper. "All right—I will tell, if I must. I was coming down from my room as you ordered and I passed Madam Certi's door —and it was there! I saw it! A great big black creature moving down the hall! I screamed—and it disappeared. I just ran and kept on screaming—and here I am!"

"You are here, all right, Miss Worthington," said Kennedy. "But what was this great black creature? Man or woman?"

"Oh—oh—oh!" She started to wail again. "I didn't stop to look. It was big and it was moving fast. That's all I saw. I wasn't stopping to see anything else!"

Voices were coming from downstairs as of people entering the hotel, the sounds of heavy feet on the porch.

"The sheriff," Condon muttered, frowning. "If only we could have kept the authorities out of this!"

"Take Miss Worthington down with you," Kennedy ordered. "And Peter also. Tell the sheriff to send a man up at once to take charge of this room. I'll stay until he comes."

Condon, Miss Worthington and old Peter went downstairs and Kennedy went back to the room. He knelt down on the floor near the piece of leather. For some time he studied it; then he picked it up with his handkerchief, wrapped the linen around it carefully and put it in his pocket.

Again he knelt and studied the floor around the bed. He brushed back the nap of the rug in different spots. Finally he smiled grimly and got up.

A moment later two men entered. One was a short, heavy-set man, a deputy-sheriff. The other was tall, thin-faced

and gray-haired; he had shell-blue eyes that gave him a soft, kindly look. He was carrying a small black leather bag.

"I am Doctor Greeley," the tall man announced to Kennedy. "Sheriff Blount asked me to help out on this case. The coroner is down at the other end of the county and can't be reached."

Nervously the other man added, "The sheriff sent me up to keep watch over the dead."

Kennedy's instructions were brief. He told the doctor to make as quick an examination of the dead man as possible in the hotel to determine the cause of death. He told the deputy to remain in the room and allow no one to enter.

Then Kennedy went downstairs.

3. *Guests of Murder*

SHERIFF BLOUNT was not the usually accepted type of country sheriff. He was young, an ex-service man, keen, alert and business-like. He wore a well-tailored suit and a soft gray hat.

Condon had given the sheriff the details of the murder by the time Kennedy got down.

"Doctor Greeley has told you why he is here, I suppose," Sheriff Blount greeted Kennedy cordially. "I have no finger-print expert but I brought along powder and impression paper. I believe you must be an expert yourself, and I know the technique pretty well."

Kennedy smiled. Everything about this young sheriff pleased him. "That's all right. We can go over things and see what we find. There likely won't be any prints, but we might run into something."

"How was Coulter murdered really? Poison?"

"It looks very much that it was, Sheriff. Two little holes over the jugular vein indicate poison, and the face is blue. Doctor Greeley should be able to give a report soon."

Kennedy was looking at the lobby as he spoke. Huddled like sheep, with silent, drawn faces, the seven guests sat in chairs.

"I want you to see that no one leaves this hotel, Sheriff," he went on. "Naturally you are in charge of the case. I'll help you all I can in clearing up this mystery."

"You mean *I'll* help *you*." The sheriff was quick to appreciate Kennedy's tact.

Kennedy and the sheriff walked over to the guests in a half-circle in big easy-chairs. In the center sat Madam Certi, stout, gray-haired, almost queenly. Her round, fat little face with her small blue eyes looked kindly. Her eyes wandered from one guest to another in patronizing, motherly fashion.

Next to her, on her right, sat Professor Mundo, a little dried-up old man with a heavy head of iron-gray hair and a thin, twitching face. His gray eyes shifted rapidly from one to another. To her left sat George Branford, a typical New York broker, sleek, self-satisfied, with an outwardly frank, open face.

To the left of Branford were the Frederick Pilchers, the occupants of the suite next to the murdered man. Mrs. Pilcher was a girl somewhere in her late twenties, slim, graceful, with a cold, sharp face of the classical type rather than the frank open beauty of the outdoor girl. There was something in her, the movements of hands and head, that bespoke the stage.

Pilcher himself was small of body, and his face was weak. It was obvious he was largely under the influence of his wife.

At the left of Professor Mundo sat Burroughs Matthews, young and handsome and slightly bored by the whole proceedings. Next to him was Godfrey Nelson, a man somewhere in his fifties, with a full red face and heavy body. Money

and success in business had left their mark on him.

Then at the right end of the half-circle, her hair still down and her face white, her lips still twitching, sat Miss Worthington. Her teeth were clicking and she kept her silence only by great effort.

Condon stood at the other end of the half-circle, and at his side was George McGuire, the pale-faced clerk. Old Peter paced back and forth behind them like a nervous animal in a cage.

"A murder has been committed in this hotel," began the sheriff quietly. "We shall have to ask each one of you to remain in the hotel until the investigation has been completed."

"I—I knew it was murder!" Miss Worthington let out a wail that might have been heard all over the hotel.

Burroughs Matthews smiled in his bored manner. Madam Certi gave a little gasp of fear. The others just stared in a helpless, grim manner.

"I knew some of us would be murdered!"

"The trains are still running," Matthews observed. "If you were so frightened, why didn't you leave?"

Miss Worthington promptly started to sob. Madam Certi gave Burroughs Matthews a reproving look.

"Mr. Kennedy will desire to question you," Blount went on.

"There will be no questions from me now," Kennedy cut in. "I want you all to go to your rooms and remain there. When I want any of you, I'll send for you."

"How long do we have to stay here?" Branford, the broker, rose. "I have to get back to New York tomorrow."

"Perhaps you may," returned the sheriff. "We'll see."

"I—I am willing to co-operate." Godfrey Nelson got up slowly, stammering. "But one man has been killed. Can we be safe if we go back to our rooms?"

"Well, you may remain in the lobby if you wish," Kennedy conceded. "One or the other."

"I won't go to my room alone!" wailed Miss Worthington. "Someone tried to kill me two weeks ago. I won't go alone!"

Matthews laughed. "Then take some brave man with you."

"A man—in my room!" Miss Worthington blushed very red and walked to the other end of the lobby and sat down.

Branford and Nelson started up the stairs slowly. Madam Certi rose, her fat little body wobbling.

"Ah, Mr. Kennedy," she gushed. "I have heard a great deal of you as a detective. I am so glad to be here in this crisis and to be able to help. You know I do many things not understood by the human mind. I know I can work with you."

"I have heard of you, Madam Certi," Kennedy replied quietly. "I am sure we will be able to work together."

The coldness of his tone was not lost on Madam Certi. For a fleeting second the sweet, kindly look on her face became a dark, animal-like scowl that passed as quickly as it came. She smiled sweetly and wobbled away.

Professor Mundo followed, walking with short, nervous strides. His eyes were on the floor, his thin face twisted.

Burroughs Matthews remained seated. "If there is any excitement to break the tedium, I hope you'll let us in on it, Kennedy."

"I shall. You may be sure of that."

Kennedy turned to Condon. "What became of old Peter as our backs were turned?"

"Why—he has disappeared." Condon

looked helplessly about. "A queer old duck. Comes and goes like a ghost."

"Never mind, now," Kennedy bustled. "The sheriff and I are going to the cellar. Show us the cellar stairs."

"The cellar!" Condon gasped. "There—there isn't anything down there—I am sure."

"And I," Kennedy insisted coldly, "am sure there is!"

4. *Mystery in the Cellar*

SLOWLY and carefully Kennedy and Sheriff Blount went down the stairs that led to the cellar. A worn electric bulb did not exactly flood the cellar with light. At the foot of the steps was a furnace on a clean cement floor. But beyond this under the different wings of the building the shadowy, yawning mouths of passageways loomed dark and sinister.

They had proceeded scarcely as far as the heater when Kennedy's body suddenly stiffened. Somewhere in the jet blackness of one of those shadowy passageways something was moving. There was the almost inaudible sound of feet.

Kennedy's automatic was out in an instant as he strode toward the shadowy part of the cellar.

"Go to the other side of the furnace and the coal bins, Blount!" he muttered. "And keep your eye peeled."

There was a swish of air. Something cracked the weak light bulb and plunged the whole cellar into deep darkness. A body was moving in that shadow. Another swish—and a guttural groan from Blount as he went down.

The same instant Kennedy's automatic blazed orange-red. He lunged forward, fairly diving into the dangerous darkness as with his other hand he whipped out his flashlight and sent a long streak of white light along the floor and walls.

The wavering streak of the flash revealed nothing, and he turned it back on Blount staggering to his feet, a thickening red trickle spreading down his forehead.

Whoever it was, whatever it was, had disappeared in the second before Craig could flash his light.

"What—hit—me?" gasped Blount.

"The person who missed me in the dark—just as I must have missed him in the dark, also," returned Kennedy.

"Person?" Blount tried weakly to laugh it off. "That was no person. It was a monster of some kind as near as I could make it out. Then something hit me."

Kennedy shook his head. "It was a very human person," he insisted, "a person who knows this cellar well and can move with the speed of a greyhound."

Craig was helping Blount to rise. "How are you?"

"All right—just groggy."

"Got to get you upstairs to Doctor Greeley right away." Kennedy advanced nevertheless, flashing his light on the walls.

The rock walls looked just as they had been left after the cellar was blasted. No cement had been put on them and no attempt had been made to smooth them over. Jagged rocks stuck out of the wall. Cracks appeared here and there.

"Come," Kennedy decided, "I've got to get you up to the doctor, pronto. Hulloa!"

His flashlight was playing on the floor where there was a thin covering of dust and dirt. Over at that end outlines of Kennedy's and Blount's footprints were visible. What Kennedy was looking at was another strange outline in the dust.

It was a round outline, more or less irregular. These outlines of strange-looking footprints came from a passage under the north wing. There were none on the smooth cement floor. But they went in on the other side, up the service stairs in the back—and were lost.

"Whoever made those prints disappeared quickly up those stairs," concluded Kennedy, "didn't stop or turn back. He just came, smashed the light, cracked your head and went! Come on, Sheriff, I must get you up to the doctor. This cellar will bear exploring, later."

By the time they got up to the Coulter suite through the now deserted lobby, Doctor Greeley had completed his examination of the body, now on the bed and covered by a sheet. The doctor was just closing his medicine bag.

Doctor Greeley squinted his eyes and looked at the sheriff.

"What's happened to you, Blount?"

"A ghost cracked me on the head in the cellar—a great big ghost that can run like hell!"

"Well, you come right over here under this light and let me have a look at you. H'm. A nasty blow. But I'll give you something to relieve the pain and then I'll dress it for you."

"By the way, Doctor," Kennedy nodded toward the bed, "what's the verdict?"

"The man died by poison that was injected into his veins," replied the doctor, working rapidly over the sheriff. "By what means it was injected, I do not know. It entered the jugular vein through two little holes that might have been made by some form of hypo-needle—and might not. He died almost instantly when the poison coursed through the blood stream."

"There was a struggle," Kennedy reconstructed, "and in the struggle Coulter was pulled off the bed. What caused the blood on his neck?"

"A series of very fine scratches, Kennedy. Very mysterious, those scratches. You have to look very closely to see them now. I didn't get them myself at first."

"I see," Craig nodded. "Just how can you connect those scratches with the two holes on the neck?"

"That, Kennedy," Greeley avoided, "is a matter for you to puzzle out. I am a doctor, not a detective."

Kennedy held up his hand and listened. An instant later he was out in the hall, past the door, where he scowled because the deputy sheriff was not there. An instant later he was in the Pilcher suite, where he had heard someone entering.

Standing in the lounge-room by a little escritoire was Mrs. Pilcher, her face pale and her lips quivering. She stared at Kennedy helplessly. All the cold cockiness she had displayed down in the lobby was gone.

"You are looking for something, Mrs. Pilcher?" inquired Kennedy courteously. "It was hardly necessary for you to wait until the deputy sheriff had been enticed away, then sneak through the halls to get it."

"I came to get some night-clothes! I don't intend to sleep in this room tonight!" She was quick with the excuse.

"Night-clothes—in the escritoire?"

Her cold thin face flushed angrily. But in her eyes there was a helpless stare, and she was stammering.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Pilcher," said Kennedy, "that I have already on my first visit to your room found what you are searching for to conceal."

Her face paled. "What—what do you mean?" she gasped.

Kennedy merely smiled. "I think you know."

Staring, with mouth gaping open, she gave a little cry of fear, then rushed out the door and down the hall.

"There you are, Blount," pronounced the doctor. "By the way, an old man who looks like a servant came with a message for your deputy. He asked me to watch. I almost forgot about it."

"Get hold of your deputy, Sheriff. Tell him not to leave his post even if he's blasted from it!" muttered Craig.

Condon, breathing heavily as if he had been running, came up the hall. "Madam Certi wants to see you in her rooms at once, Kennedy. It's important, she says, very important."

5. *Death Screams Twice*

MADAM CERTI'S suite was in the south wing, overlooking the great mountain that rose in the rear of the hotel. It consisted of two rooms: a bedroom and a front room larger than in most suites.

This front room was filled with strange-looking furniture which Madam at her own expense moved up at the beginning of the summer in a small van. Odd-shaped chairs that rose only a few inches from the floor, teak tables weirdly shaped, black curtains that hung from the ceiling putting the room at all times in dark and shadow. At one end was a dais, somewhat like a throne of an ancient queen. Black curtains from the ceiling almost hid the throne chair.

Madam Certi, clothed in a long, flowing white robe, her head covered by a veil-like hood, met Kennedy and the sheriff at the door.

"Ah, Mr. Kennedy," she crooned in a soft whisper. "You have come to Madam Certi and it is well. For I will make the dead speak and when they speak you will learn much."

"So, you got me here to show me a little spiritualism," he smiled. "I thought it was something important."

An angry scowl flitted over the round, fat face of Certi. "I will show you," she reproved, "how Mr. Coulter was killed, because I have talked with him and he will appear to you."

"Talking with spirits won't get us anywhere," growled Blount. "Even a scientist like Professor Mundo might——"

"Ah, Professor Mundo," Madam Certi interrupted softly. "You wish to see him? He is here right now."

One of the curtains moved. The small wizened form of Professor Mundo appeared. His face was pale and he was trembling.

The lights went out. From the dais came the voice of Certi. "You will now see Madam Certi call the dead to speak! You will now see how Madam Certi can help you, Craig Kennedy!"

Silence, eery and oppressive. The voice of Madam Certi came in a low droning. Her words were incoherent.

Blount started toward the door. Kennedy's arm shot out, stopping him.

"Wait a minute!" Craig whispered. "It may all have some meaning."

Madam Certi's voice grew higher and plainer.

"Speak, departed one, speak, for there are those here who would know of thy death."

An effusion of amber rays fell upon the white-cloaked figure of Madam Certi. Then the rays dimmed. It was some light effect no doubt rigged up by Professor Mundo.

"Speak, spirit of John Coulter, speak!"

"She's crazy as hell," Blount muttered in disgust. "She——"

He didn't finish the sentence. As the light faded from Madam's face and figure, another light appeared to her right, at first just a soft glow; then as it grew stronger the outlines of a white face appeared in the light.

Blount gave a gasp of surprize. It certainly did strongly resemble the face of John Coulter, the murdered man.

"You are with friends, Mr. Coulter," she droned. "You may speak and tell them what you told me."

Coulter's face was vivid and ghastly. The lips actually began to move, as the light shimmered over the face.

"I was murdered." The voice was hollow, metallic, like a voice from a radio-drama telephone. "I was murdered by a fiend who kills through means more hideous than those of the Dark Ages." The voice died away in a groan.

"Speak on!" urged Madam Certi. "There are those who would avenge thy murder."

The lips of the ghastly vision moved again.

"Study well the marks on my neck and you will see——"

Even the voice of the dead was interrupted. Somewhere through the hallway the low wail of the death scream, the scream that had followed Coulter's death, broke the air. It rose to a high pitch, a weird, unearthly scream of death. It rang through the hotel, increasing in volume until it was an inhuman, terrifying screech.

The face of John Coulter disappeared. The light went out.

Kennedy made a leap for the door of the suite.

"Stay here, Blount! Don't let them escape!" he cried.

The door was locked. Kennedy fumbled, found the light-switch and flooded the apartment with light. The Madam was gone from the throne. Blount poked the curtain. Mundo was not there, either.

Outside, somewhere on the second floor, the weird, death-like scream was dying into a pitiful moan. A woman was yelling hysterically. Footsteps of men in the hall could be heard.

KENNEDY crashed the lock with a succession of slugs from his automatic. As he leaped into the hall he looked back.

"The head's a wax figure, made up—lips move on wires!" shouted Blount, who had torn aside another curtain.

Kennedy could hear people talking excitedly somewhere in the south wing. He strode down, swerved at the first turn. McGuire, the pale-faced clerk, and Condon were before a door. Old Peter came around a corner and joined them.

"It's Branford's room!" Condon muttered huskily as Kennedy strode up quickly.

McGuire was turning the lock with his pass-key. The door opened. No night bolt had been shot this time.

Kennedy pushed the clerk unceremoniously aside and took a step into the room. The lights were out. His hand fumbled for the light-switch, found it, snapped it on.

Lying on the floor, near the window, clad in pajamas, and with some bed-covers wound around his legs, was the body of George Branford. He lay partly on his side, his face toward them.

The face was blue and distorted, twisted out of shape, as if, like Coulter, Branford had died in some great pain or fear.

Kennedy walked over to the body and looked down at the neck. Blood was over it. He knelt down and brushed the blood away from the jugular vein. There, as in the case of Coulter, were two little black holes, no larger than a pinhead!

Kennedy got up. His face was set and hard. Lines played about his mouth. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Condon in the doorway was staring, terror-stricken, at Branford's body. McGuire, at his side, the color completely gone from his face, was fidgeting nervously. Old Peter had disappeared again.

"Whose is the next suite?" Kennedy waved his hand in the direction of the corner in the hall.

Condon wet his lips. "The Pilchers," he replied.

"You gave them a room next to Branford?"

"Yes. They requested it."

"And on the other side?"

"Empty."

Kennedy went to the window and looked out. It was the front of the hotel, still, although around a turn in the hall. He was about to say something as Sheriff Blount burst into the room.

"They're gone! They've disappeared!" Blount cried. "Not in their rooms—not anywhere in the hotel!"

"I'm not surprized," returned Kennedy quietly.

A woman suddenly flung open the door of her room far down the hall. Her hair was streaming and her teeth chattered, as her eyes were staring wild with fear.

It was Miss Worthington.

"Look! Look!" she cried in a crescendo. "It went through the lobby! Look—out the window!"

Kennedy turned to the window. The road that ran in front of the Three Pines was flooded with a soft moonlight that penetrated a bit through the trees that lined the road. A form, dark and moving with the swiftness of an animal, was disappearing into the trees.

Kennedy took one good look; then with a spring he was through the door of the room.

Miss Worthington, with the sight of the dead body of Branford lying on the floor, groaned and slumped into a swoon in the arms of Condon, who caught her.

"Check them all as far as you can, Sheriff," Kennedy called back over his shoulder as he ran. "Have them all in the lobby."

A matter of seconds and he was out and across the road in front of the hotel.

6. *The Grave on the Mountain*

THE moonlight filtered through the great pines that covered the mountainside in fleeting, darting shafts of light. In places it cut through the trees with the brightness of day; in other places it failed to penetrate and the darkness was jet-black and heavy.

Kennedy dashed through the trees. No sign of the form appeared. He came to a narrow path that wound in and out among the trees like a wriggling snake. He followed it.

It was taking him far down the mountain and out across a little plateau. Here and there the moon lighted his way; at other times he was plunging through a darkness so intense he could scarcely see the trees before him.

Blindly he followed the path. He had no idea whether the person he had seen disappear in the trees was in front of him or far to his right or left. He plunged on, his mind mystified at what he had seen from the window.

The person who had disappeared among the trees was no dark form or monster. Kennedy's one good look told him that. But what he had seen was even more puzzling than if it had been the dark form of some monster. The man who plunged into the pines was Burroughs Matthews!

Slowly in Kennedy's mind there had been forming a solution to the strange murders. But this solution was so weird, so terrifying that at first he had refused to give it credence. The séance of Madam Certi had given him an inkling that it was true. And yet in this solution Burroughs Matthews had had no place. But now he was following the young man, who was rich and cultured and very much bored with life. Kennedy wondered vaguely where this chase was taking him.

Suddenly Kennedy stopped. He was in the darkness of the trees; but out in front of him was an open space, flooded brightly by the moonlight. An old stone fence was around the open space and the grass grew wild and high over the fence.

Inside the enclosure was a small mound. An old tombstone leaned grotesquely in the tall, wild grass.

Kneeling down by this tombstone was the slender, youthful form of Burroughs Matthews.

Kennedy remained in the darkness of the trees and watched. The young man was tugging at the tombstone. Then suddenly he stopped, took a piece of paper from his pocket and began writing on it. He made only a few notes. Then he jumped up suddenly, ran through the grass away from Kennedy, disappearing over the stone fence.

Had he heard something?

Kennedy did not follow him. For several minutes he remained standing in the shadow of the trees. Then he struck out into the open, leaped the stone fence and thrashed through the grass to the lone grave.

It was an old-fashioned round-topped tombstone with the grass swaying weirdly about it.

The inscription read:

GYPSY JONES
Born August 12, 1871
Died July 22, 1924
So have I lived unknown
So shall I die unknown

Kennedy studied the strange inscription. He took a pencil from his pocket and copied it in a notebook. He slipped the book back into his pocket and turned to retrace his steps.

Something was moving in the grass to his right. Instantly he went down flat on his stomach. He lay still, his body tense and ready for a spring. But only the silence of the night greeted him. The tall grass waved lazily in the soft breeze. A little to his right the old tombstone seemed to lean weirdly, loosened.

Somewhere in front of him he had seen the grass move. But now there was no sign of life there. Slowly he crawled forward on his stomach; it was difficult work in the grass. His automatic was ready but he wasn't firing blindly and giving the advantage of knowing where he was. He moved forward several yards flat on the ground.

Somewhere in front of him there came a harsh, inhuman laugh. Two cold hands with powerful fingers went around his throat. He felt fingernails tearing at his skin. He drew his legs under his body for one supreme lunge forward to throw off his strange attacker.

But he never got his legs under his body. From behind, what seemed in the darkness a form, huge and grotesque, loomed over him, poised in the air a second, then crashed down on his head, and he saw no more.

KENNEDY came to, later, with someone shaking his body violently. He opened his eyes, but the pain in his head was too great.

Someone was leaning over him. At first he could not recognize who it was. Then the outlines of a young and handsome face came to him. He blinked his eyes again. It was Burroughs Matthews!

"I came out for a quiet walk," said Matthews, "and I run right into excitement! Someone must have been trying hard to kill you, Kennedy. You have me to thank that they didn't."

"I don't know," Kennedy muttered as he struggled to his feet, "whether I should thank you—or arrest you as a material witness."

"Neither is very important right now," returned Matthews.

"Why were you trying to remove that tombstone—and why did you stop?"

"Just curiosity," Matthews answered in a bored manner. "I heard someone coming. So I started away. When I heard a struggle I came running back. The tombstone was gone. You were lying on the ground and some baffling-looking person in the dark was going over the fence. That's all. Come, I'll get you back to the hotel."

7. *The Story of Gypsy Jones*

As KENNEDY and Matthews walked into the lobby of the hotel the four remaining guests were seated in a circle at the far end. Sheriff Blount and Condon were with them.

Mr. and Mrs. Pilcher sat close together on a small couch, their eyes on the floor. Mrs. Pilcher had lost much of her brazen attitude. She did not look up as Kennedy placed Matthews next to her.

Godfrey Nelson, his full, red face drawn and haggard, sat directly across from them. Miss Worthington, hysterical and crying softly to herself, sat near Condon. She insisted on his holding her hand, which the young manager did with a scowl.

"Burroughs Matthews is not to leave this hotel, Sheriff," indicated Kennedy. "Have one of your men with him all the time. I have something important to discuss with you and Condon now."

The Pilchers looked up at Matthews, surprized and puzzled. Godfrey Nelson stared at the young man. Even Miss Worthington stopped crying to look at him.

Matthews smiled and nonchalantly lighted a cigarette.

"Sweet man, you are," Matthews laughed dryly. "I save your life—and then you virtually place me under arrest!"

Kennedy said nothing. He turned and walked into Condon's private office with the young manager. Blount motioned to one of his men, whispered his orders, and followed them closely.

In the office Kennedy shut the door himself, then turned to the other two. "I want all the information you have about one Gypsy Jones buried down there on the plateau."

Condon looked blank at him. Sheriff Blount was puzzled.

"Gypsy Jones?" the sheriff repeated. "You mean that fellow who lived like a hermit on this mountain when the hotel was being built?"

"I imagine so," Kennedy encouraged. "There was a tombstone down there with his name on it, his dates and a queer inscription underneath. I followed Burroughs Matthews down there after the murder of Branford. Someone knocked me unconscious. When I came to, Matthews was there—the tombstone was missing."

"Missing!" Blount repeated, then wrinkled his forehead. "I don't remember a great deal about Gypsy Jones. I was pretty young when he died. But as a boy I can remember the strange old man who lived on this mountain like a hermit."

"Oh, I've heard of him," Condon put in. "Yes; he died the year the hotel was opened. I have heard of this Gypsy Jones. Why, Godfrey Nelson was a guest of the hotel the year that Gypsy Jones died. He was supposed to have known him."

"Did Coulter know this Gypsy Jones?"

Condon wet his lips and nodded. "Yes," he said at length. "Coulter knew him, I believe. So did Branford. Coulter, Branford and Nelson are our oldest guests. They've spent every summer here since the place opened."

"Get Godfrey Nelson in here," Kennedy ordered.

A FEW minutes later Nelson entered the room, his round, red face a bit pale and his eyes roving anxiously.

"Tell us all you know about Gypsy Jones, Nelson," Kennedy demanded briskly. "All."

"Gypsy Jones?" Nelson repeated. He was sparring for time. His eyes met Kennedy's. "Why—why," he decided to surrender, "it was ten years ago he died. Yes, I knew him. A strange character. In fact, I was present at his death. People around here considered him insane. He lived in an old shack that has since been torn down. He was buried near the shack."

"Coulter and Branford knew him," prompted Kennedy.

"Why—yes; they knew him as I did."

"You were guests," prompted Kennedy again, "the first year."

"Yes, we three often tramped over the mountains. I think it was Branford who first ran across Gypsy Jones. Jones was an old man with a fine, intellectual face. We were convinced Gypsy Jones was not his real name, that he was a man of breeding and culture—perhaps a man with a past he was trying to forget."

"Did you learn his real name?" demanded Kennedy.

Nelson hesitated, then decided it was best to tell. "Yes—his real name was Sir Charles Wainwright. He was an Englishman."

"An Englishman? Why was he buried as Gypsy Jones—and on that lonely spot?"

Godfrey Nelson shook his head. "It was his last wish," he replied earnestly. "Coulter and I were with him just before he died. He was delirious and it was then that we heard his real name. But before he died he was himself again. He asked us if he had talked. We told him he had. Then he made us solemnly promise that he would be buried as Gypsy Jones and that his name would for ever remain a secret with us."

The breaking of a confidence to a dying man seemed to worry Nelson.

"When a man is dying," he went on, on the defensive, "a person respects his wishes. So he was buried there as he wished. Why, he dictated the inscription for his tombstone. The three of us respected the oath. I am talking now only because the law is forcing me to talk. What mystery was behind this poor man's life, I don't know. What that may have to do with these terrible murders, I can't conceive."

"It has very much to do," asserted Kennedy. "Coulter, Branford and you are, or should be, the only persons who knew the real identity of this man. And now someone is very anxious, for some reason, to see each of you die before you can tell."

Nelson paled and bit his lip. "You mean," he said weakly, "I am to die, also?"

"You," asserted Kennedy grimly, "are scheduled to die next. But if you do as I instruct, you have nothing to fear."

Nelson's lips twitched. His face was imploring.

"You," Kennedy instructed, "are to remain in this hotel. But you are not to go to your room alone, or any other room, under any circumstances. You are to remain down here in the lobby and Sheriff Blount will assign one of his best men to remain with you. If you fall asleep, there will be someone awake near you. You may go back into the lobby now."

Godfrey Nelson got up slowly and walked out of the room.

"But, Kennedy," the sheriff remonstrated, "how could a man like Gypsy Jones be connected in any way with these murders? He died ten years ago. He was half crazy and——"

"Three men knew who he was; two

of these men are dead." Kennedy was positive. "If we're not careful the third will die."

"Yes, but that death scream——"

"I have a theory about that; it may seem fantastic and weird just now. Those two pieces of leather gave me my first hunch. I think it is going to take us back down-cellar."

"Let's go, then, and get it over." The sheriff rubbed his sore head ruefully.

Kennedy shook his head. "I am not ready yet. First I must check up on some facts that have aroused my suspicions. To do that I must go to New York immediately."

8. *Apartment 513*

KENNEDY'S roadster cut through the night with the speedometer registering better than seventy much of the time. He slumped in the seat wearily, his face set. For the first time since the attack near the lone grave he realized the strain.

Intermittently far behind him came the subdued roar of a powerful car.

He crossed the Hudson by the Peekskill Bridge. On this wide road he was shooting the gas to his motor. The illuminated dial of his wrist-watch gave two-thirty as the time when he hit the Bronx River Parkway.

Still, now and then, that subdued roar of a powerful car.

It was ten minutes to four when he pulled up before the granite, pillared and domed building on Center Street which was Police Headquarters.

He was there probably not more than twenty minutes, making requests for information in the morning, telephoning and checking up on an address he had taken from the register at the Three Pines.

He examined the automatic in his left coat pocket, checked the ammunition in the clip, then did the same with the automatic in his shoulder holster.

His plan of campaign set, Kennedy nodded to the officer at the main entrance, ran down the steps, and shot his roadster slithering uptown on the East Side, with little to hinder him but a few cruising night-hawk taxis.

Eyes on the mirror, he finally satisfied himself that he was not being followed. Only then did he turn, shoot across town to Second Avenue, finally pulling up at a corner in the upper forties.

No sign of life moving on the street. Across, an apartment house loomed. It was not a new building. There was, however, an air of exclusiveness about it, a look that set it apart from the cheaper tenements surrounding it.

For some time Kennedy studied the building. There was just one light from a window on the fifth floor. Perhaps someone had forgotten to switch off the light. Otherwise it was dark.

Finally, Kennedy crossed the street. A colored boy was dozing in a chair by the elevator.

Kennedy twirled a five-dollar bill in his hands. "Apartment 513," he said peremptorily, stepping into the car.

The colored boy was wide awake now. He looked greedily at the five-dollar note, then uncertainly at Kennedy. Casually Kennedy slipped his hand from his left coat pocket and turned up the left lapel of his coat. A shield which he wore by courtesy of the police commissioner, gleamed.

The colored boy swallowed hard, took the bill, shot the car upward to the fifth floor.

"Don't bang the door, Rastus," Kennedy admonished as the boy hesitated. "Shoot down—but keep awake, if I should ring."

"Yas, suh!" The boy was still popeyed over the shield.

The moment the elevator was gone, Kennedy, noting that 506 was before him, turned and walked quietly until he stopped before a door numbered 513.

He pressed the buzzer. There was no answer. He pressed again and listened again. Only the deep impressive silence of night.

He tried the door. It was locked, of course. With a quick look up and down the hall, he took a piece of steel from his pocket. It was only a matter of minutes before he sprung the lock, and the door opened.

A wall of darkness greeted him. With his hand on the automatic in his holster, Kennedy felt his way down a long narrow corridor. This was the Pullman type of apartment.

At the end he came out on a large room facing the street. Enough light feebly filtered in from the street to give a shadowy outline of the furniture.

Kennedy stood, his body rigid, right hand still gripping the automatic. His ears strained, but only an eery silence greeted him.

Then he walked over to the wall, felt along it until he came to the light-switch, turned it, and the room was flooded with light. A moment he stood, his body tense and ready for action, eyes and ears alert for any sound or movement.

It was the living-room of the apartment. From all indications it had not been used for some time. A coat of city dust covered tables, chairs and bookcases.

He went over to a bookcase, and glanced cursorily at the books. Suddenly his attention was drawn to a book out of the top of which stuck several pieces of paper. He removed it from the bookcase. The slips of paper showed that someone had the habit of marking places in the book in this manner. He opened to the marked places rapidly. Then he found another and still another book similarly marked.

All the markers were at descriptions of poisons!

KENNEDY piled the books up on a chair and turned to the apartment for further investigation.

He turned into a room off the living-room, a small study, with a desk at the window also opening on the street. A letter file on the desk was open, drawers were pulled out, papers, letters, documents were scattered about.

Someone had been there before him! He thought of the roar of the high-powered motor behind him on the road. He reached up to feel the electric light bulb. It was still hot. Someone had been there only minutes ago!

His left hand still on the bulb overhead and his right on the gun in his shoulder holster, a body came hurtling at him through the semi-darkness of the room.

He had turned and drawn with the speed of lightning. But the suddenness of the attack sent his shot wild as he felt thin arms encircling him with the insane power of a maniac. The impetus of the attack knocked the automatic from his hand. He might have reached for the other in his coat pocket, but he needed both arms to fight off the maniacal clutch of those wiry arms.

Together they went to the floor. Silently, grimly they struggled, each trying for a strangle hold. The body under Kennedy was slippery and quick as a cat. Kennedy's hands went to the person's neck. Once he had it he might either reach the gun on the floor with his right hand or the gun in his pocket with the left.

He had it! The gun on the floor was only six inches away.

The body slipped out from under him

with an incredible eeliness. His right hand had the gun—but his left was only gripping the floor.

He threw his body backward and made a dive in the darkness for the legs that must be there. The lunge through the dark for his unknown assailant was futile. There came a bang—and out in the hallway a dry, inhuman laugh. No other sound.

Kennedy was on his feet, his body against the door. It was the door that had banged shut. It did not give. His flashlight had been smashed in the scuffle. He felt along the wall for the switch, turned it, and flooded the little room with light. A closet door was open.

He smiled a cold, bitter smile as he saw the desk and floor covered with papers, scattered in every direction. That must have been the fifth-floor light he had seen. The intruder had been working as he entered, must have retreated into the closet, and catapulted himself out the instant Kennedy's back was turned.

As Kennedy wrenched at the closed door he realized there was a snap-lock on the other side. The outside apartment door banged. Should he shoot the lock and pursue?

His eye lighted on a burned piece of paper, a letterhead torn across the top. Gun in hand, he picked it up.

Engraved in old English across the top were the words:

Sir Charles Wainwright
42 Haversham Road
Whitehall
London, England

The typed part had been burned in the little fireplace, along with other charred paper.

He turned to the lock, shot it open, and dashed down the hall, both guns in his hands. In the hall he thought for a moment. The assailant had just enough start to enable him to make a getaway down the fire-stairs.

He turned back and dashed to the front windows. The first rays of dawn were breaking. Down on the street he could make out a tall, thin form scurrying from the street door.

A cold, satisfied smile played over Kennedy's face. The form he had seen scurrying out and around the corner was none other than McGuire, the tall, pale-faced clerk at Three Pines!

He felt for the paper in his pocket, picked up the books on the chair, switched out the lights, and went out leisurely.

9. *Attempted Suicide*

It was forenoon when Kennedy got out of bed at his apartment on Riverside Drive.

His man, Parker, had three telegrams and notations of two telephone calls that had come in that morning.

Kennedy scanned the telegrams casually and stuffed them into his pocket. Then he called back twice on the telephone. Already, breakfast, still steaming, had arrived from the restaurant downstairs.

He was eating leisurely and Parker was busying himself about the diggings, when suddenly Parker stopped short.

"Oh, by the way, sir, begging your pardon, sir," Parker interjected apologetically, "Police Headquarters telephoned while you were in the bath and asked that you be informed they have arrested Madam Certi and a Professor Mundo and are having them held, sir. I made no notation and I forgot to tell you, sir."

Kennedy frowned.

"Stupid!" he exclaimed. "Headquarters is the last place I want Madam Certi and Professor Mundo held."

"And, sir, they said, I believe, that they arrested them at Madam Certi's apartment. I understood them to say they

made the arrest at five this morning when Madam Certi and the professor entered the apartment."

"Hand me the telephone, Parker—I must have them released at once—no, it can wait. I shall be at headquarters several hours before I am able to drive back to Three Pines. You'll probably see me in the early morning hours, Parker. Tell people I am out of town, that's all. Use your discretion."

"Thank you, sir. Good-bye, sir," Parker bowed as Kennedy strode out to his roadster which had already been sent around from the garage, washed, greased, oiled and generally tuned up.

It was about four when Kennedy swung into his roadster down at Center Street and started back to the Three Pines Hotel in the Catskill Mountains. When finally he left the city behind he kept his car at an easy speed and appeared in no great hurry to get back to the hotel.

His face no longer wore a puzzled look. In the rumble of the car were piled the books with their telltale slips of paper as markers. He had various strips of leather. And in his breast pocket was a voluminous sheaf of telegrams and radiograms.

Shortly past seven he parked his roadster in front of the Three Pines. Sheriff Blount was waiting on the veranda.

Ignoring the locked rumble seat and its precious evidence, Kennedy locked the car as the sheriff came down the steps.

"Madam Certi and Professor Mundo came back an hour ago," the sheriff announced, modulating his voice. "Someone drove them back from New York and they have gone directly to Madam Certi's room and have locked themselves in. Something queer is going on in there. Strange noises are coming from the room."

"Anything happen since I left?" Kennedy inquired.

"Happen? Plenty! Mrs. Pilcher tried to commit suicide. That's just one of the many things that have happened."

"Tried to commit suicide?" Kennedy repeated quickly.

"I don't understand it," Blount returned. "But, then, there isn't anything I do understand about this whole damned case. Yes; Mr. Pilcher came running wildly down the stairs about noon, shouting that his wife had taken poison. I got Doc Greeley up here and sure as hell she had taken some poison. The Doc was able to bring her around after pumping out her stomach. She's upstairs now and won't speak to anyone. Her husband's been acting queer ever since."

"What else happened?" Kennedy asked keenly.

"About everything you could think of," Blount answered wearily. "Old Peter came back and then disappeared again. And then that damned scream! It came again—right after Madam Certi and Professor Mundo came back and locked themselves in the room."

"The scream!" Kennedy exclaimed. "Who's been killed?"

"Nobody was killed. But the scream sent the old maid, Miss Worthington, into hysterics. Doc Greeley took her home with him. I hope Mrs. Greeley gets her quiet. She used to be a nurse, you know. I know what I'd do with her if I had my way—solitary and straitjacket!"

"Quite scientific, quite scientific," Kennedy ignored. "What about Godfrey Nelson? You gave my heart a jump when you mentioned that scream."

"Oh, Nelson has hardly stirred from his chair in the lobby. Just sits there like a man who is about to be electrocuted."

Kennedy by this time was walking into the lobby, Blount following, shoulders sagging a bit and face tired.

Godfrey Nelson was the only person except his guard in the lobby at the mo-

ment. He was sitting in a large easy-chair, his hands gripping the arms of the chair and his eyes staring first one way, then another.

"And my friend, McGuire, the clerk?" Kennedy asked, seeing no one behind the desk. "Has he come back yet?"

"Come back?" Blount exclaimed. "Where did he go?"

"On a rather long trip," Kennedy avoided dryly. "Is he in the hotel now?"

"I saw him a few minutes ago. Up in his room, I guess. He's not on duty at this hour."

"I see."

BURROUGHS MATTHEWS was walking down the stairs at the moment with his usual bored nonchalance.

"Ah, there you are, Kennedy!" he greeted. "I say, Mrs. Pilcher has been asking for you. She wants very much to talk to you, refuses to talk to Sheriff Blount. It seems her conscience is troubling her. So, you see, Kennedy, I haven't run away yet—and we haven't found the tombstone either."

"When the time comes, Matthews," Kennedy retorted, "that block of brownstone may upset somebody as if it were thrown at them. Come on, Sheriff; we'll both go up and see what Mrs. Pilcher has to say."

Matthews shrugged and walked over to Nelson and sat down beside him. Kennedy and Blount ascended the wide stair.

Mrs. Pilcher was in bed. Her face wore a death-like pallor and her eyes were wild and glassy. Her husband sat near the bed. His thin face was turned to her and his eyes seemed to bore like gimlets. He looked up at Kennedy and Blount as they entered. But there was nothing friendly about his look.

Kennedy went over by the bed and stood by her.

"There is something—something I must tell you, Mr. Kennedy," she murmured. Her voice was weak and had a far-away note in it as she opened her eyes, then closed them again. "I wanted to die—so I wouldn't have to tell it—but they wouldn't let me—and now I have to tell——"

Her voice died away in a feeble moan. She looked at her husband. His eyes were flashing fire and hatred.

She shook her head as if to gather her thoughts. "Fred," she said to her husband, "we—I must tell!"

He rose stiffly, his thin lips pressed tightly.

"Ethel!" His voice cut the air like a sharp knife.

She raised her head and body a little, gave a frightened scream, then fell back on the bed in a swoon.

Her husband turned to Kennedy and Blount. "I am sorry, gentlemen," he said in a smooth, oily voice, "but Mrs. Pilcher is still delirious. She doesn't know what she is doing."

Kennedy shot a withering look at Pilcher.

"Mrs. Pilcher doesn't need a doctor," he said curtly. "Mrs. Pilcher needs a friend right now!" He massaged her temples.

Kennedy turned as her eyelids fluttered, and walked out of the room. Blount hesitated, looked at the pale face of the woman, her breathing so low it could just be distinguished, then followed quickly.

"What do you make of it?" He jerked his head backward.

"She'll never talk as long as that husband is around, and we can't very well see her now without his being in the room."

From far up the hall came a low moan, a moan as of pain.

"Madam Certi!" Blount muttered with

a scowl. "That's been going on ever since she came back."

The moaning suddenly ceased. Someone was talking in a low, chanting voice. The voice stopped and the moan resumed.

"Talking with the dead!" Kennedy exclaimed. "It won't get us anywhere to disturb her now."

He looked at his wrist-watch. "First we're going out to the car. You're going to help me carry some stuff into Condon's office where I can lock it up. Then I'll take you down-cellar and solve the weird part of these murders!"

10. The Secret of the Cellar

CONDON'S private office was empty when Kennedy and Blount entered, their arms full, from the car.

"Condon is up in his room," Blount explained. "He went up just before you came back. He is fagged out."

"Just as well." Kennedy closed the door and locked it on the inside. "We have the office to ourselves. I can explain certain things that I want to tell you."

Kennedy laid the books on the desk and took the sheaf of telegrams and radiograms from his pocket.

"I found out, Blount," he began, "that Gypsy Jones who lies buried out there is going to figure as the key to this case."

Kennedy selected one radiogram in particular.

"I found out, for one thing," he went on, "that the Wainwright estate in England is a very large one. The last heir died in London. The money is now looking for someone to go to."

"The Wainwright estate?" Blount inquired, puzzled.

"Yes. It seems that Sir Charles Wainwright, the chap buried out there as Gypsy Jones, left his ancestral home when he was a young man. He had some trouble with his family over his escapades and changed his name. His estrangement and all preyed on his mind—finally drove him to lead the life of a hermit up in these mountains."

Kennedy paused. Blount was all ears.

"But," Kennedy added impressively, "before he started to lead that life, he had married under the name of Jones in New York. To this marriage was born a son. That son is now living in New York. Under the law this son would inherit the entire Wainwright estate if he could establish the fact that his father, this Gypsy Jones, was Sir Charles Wainwright. That son has no suspicion, even, who his father really was!"

The sheriff framed his lips for a low whistle.

"There is, however, a certain other collateral heir to this vast estate who, if the identity of Gypsy Jones is never known, will inherit the fortune. Thus you have the reason why someone is frantically busy to murder the three men who could swear that Gypsy Jones was really Sir Charles Wainwright. This person happens to be right in this hotel!"

Kennedy spread out the telegrams before Blount.

"The whole story can be found in these telegrams and radiograms. I had Police Headquarters wireless Scotland Yard for the complete information. They got a prompt answer. Those books I took out of an apartment of the person who has murdered two people and hopes to murder the third."

Blount fumbled the messages nervously.

"Yes," Kennedy repeated, "the moment Godfrey Nelson leaves that chair and goes upstairs, he will be a dead man!"

"Phew!" Blount was reading the messages, trying to digest them. "Then you know what that scream is?"

"We'll find out about that weird part

of it all in the cellar," Kennedy nodded. "I've had a hunch all along what it was. But it wasn't until I read a couple of volumes in the Police Academy up the street from headquarters that I was convinced."

Impatiently Kennedy slipped the books and other stuff into the safe, shoved the telegrams in his pocket, unlocked the door and then locked it again.

"Better have your automatic ready, Sheriff," he said ominously as they approached the cellar stairs; "you might have to use it down here any moment. Be prepared for some fast work!"

"O. K., Kennedy!" said the sheriff, grimly following as Kennedy opened the door.

THE cellar under the north wing of the hotel was brightly lighted now with a hundred-power lamp. Sheriff Blount had put it down there during the day.

The stone walls of the cellar, left exactly as they had been blasted out of the side of the mountains, loomed ruggedly in the brilliant light, a wall of jagged rocks. Here and there large cracks appeared in the rock, and at several different places dampness seeped through.

The dusty floor of the cellar was covered with footprints this time, none now distinguishable from the others in the mass. Old pieces of broken furniture strewed the floor, and boxes with an accumulation of dust were piled against the wall.

Kennedy moved swiftly along the east wall of the cellar, his face tense, his automatic in his right hand.

Blount followed, a look of bewilderment on his face as Kennedy gave up trying to study the footprints and started tapping the wall with an old stick. The taps echoed sharp and clear through the cellar.

Suddenly he stopped. He stepped back and surveyed the wall. On his face was a puzzled look.

"It's there," he said, "somewhere in that wall!"

Blount looked at him. "What's there?" he demanded.

Kennedy said nothing. He just surveyed the cellar wall. To the right in the direction of the main cellar old boxes were piled against the wall. To the left the jagged rocks extended to another cross-corridor of the cellar about twenty feet.

"Hidden very well," he muttered to himself. "Better than I had expected."

Blount now merely looked. Kennedy picked up a rock to tap the wall. Then he got down on his knees and started tapping the wall from the bottom.

He stopped. The clear sharp taps on the rock had a hollow sound. He got up and tapped the wall clear to the top.

"It's here all right!" he cried. "Give me a hand, Blount."

Blount started toward the wall to do so, then stopped suddenly. His body froze in his tracks, his face lost all color. Even Kennedy paled a bit and took an involuntary step backward.

From somewhere beyond that jagged wall of rock there came the wailing unearthly scream, the scream that had followed the murders of both Coulter and Branford.

At first it was low and indistinct and far away; then it increased in volume, a screeching, blood-freezing scream, inhuman, piercing, weird enough to set on edge with terror the nerves of the most intrepid human being. Then it died away into a mournful, sad moan; died away, it seemed, into the very bowels of the earth.

For seconds after it ceased, a deep, oppressive silence hung over the cellar. Blount stared at the wall, his eyes wild and his face a death-like gray. Kennedy

wet his lips and in spite of himself gave a quick, nervous laugh.

"We've found it, all right," he said slowly. "Now we'll have to find out how to get on the other side of this wall."

"Good God, man," groaned Blount, "you're not going there?"

"As soon as I can find a way," returned Kennedy.

He was tearing at the jagged rocks. He loosed a rock and then some dirt. He paused. That did not seem very practical. A moment and he began moving some large but comparatively light wooden crates piled up alongside the wall. Back of them was a huge piece of slate-rock. He pried at it with a stick, and the slate swung outward on hinges. A dark, yawning opening was revealed that led to a cave-like room back of the rock wall.

"Be ready for anything, Blount!" Kennedy cautioned. "This thing was evidently built for a cold room in the summer and a root cellar in the winter—without a doubt overlooked when the new hotel syndicate took over the hotel. Now—watch out!"

A gust of dank musty air came from the yawning hole. There was something fetid, mephitic, bestial in it. Black as jet, the yawning cavern opened in front of Kennedy and Blount.

Kennedy turned slightly to see that the sheriff was following close behind. Then he deliberately stepped forward into the darkened hole and disappeared in the blackness.

11. Death Screams Thrice

KENNEDY walked straight ahead some ten feet before he stopped. The darkness was so intense that he could see absolutely nothing. Inside the dungeon-like room, the air was warm and there was an odor of either animal or human presence, the odor mixed with the dank, heavy air of the underground cavern.

He threw the white beam of his flashlight around in the darkness. It fell on a jagged rock wall and then on an old table. He flashed it on the other side of the cave. Another wall, and near the wall an old couch.

He threw the light back on the table. There was a candle-stub on the table. He took a step over to it and lighted it. At first the flame of the candle flickered weakly; then it gained strength and cast a wavering light around the dungeon.

Sheriff Blount was standing near the entrance, where the light from the now brightly lighted cellar died away into the darkness of the cave. Blount walked closer to Kennedy.

"What is this?" he asked. "There is a bed!"

Kennedy was examining a bottle that stood on the table. He pulled the cork, poured out a bit on the table-top, and smelled it carefully.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed to himself. "It's all working out. That's the poison marked in the books."

He examined the cave closely. The rock floor was damp and there was considerable straw scattered over it. Suddenly he reached down and pulled something heavy out of the darkness under the couch. It was a large, flat rock.

"Our tombstone!" he cried. "The murderer hid it here!"

He studied it under the light, especially the wording of the inscription.

"Sir Charles was romantic," he smiled grimly. "He wanted to die unknown and unsung. But he wanted the world to know that he died unknown and unsung."

"Yes. What do you make of this room?" Blount was not romantic. "It still leaves a great deal to be solved about those strange murders."

"It won't; not when we've found the thing we came here for," Kennedy replied. "That bottle of poison tells a great deal. I think the floor will tell more."

Kennedy swung the beam of light on the floor. "Pieces of leather—a strap clawed and chewed until it's cut!" he cried.

"Look!" Blount exclaimed. "There's meat down here, too! You mean to tell me that this is a den for an animal?"

Kennedy had no chance to answer. A dark form suddenly moved swiftly out of a black hole in the wall. It was a large form, and it shot across the shadowy cave like a streak. It was out of the door before either Kennedy or Blount could blaze away at it.

"Good God! What is it?" Blount cried.

Kennedy was out of the cave dashing through the cellar at top speed, Blount some twenty feet behind him.

Kennedy did not stop to seek where it had gone. He had but one thought in his mind. He took the cellar steps two at a time.

Godfrey Nelson was there, safe with his guard.

"Get another man with him, too, Sheriff, quick!"

Blount called another of his deputies. "But, Kennedy," he whispered aside, "what was that dark form?"

"An animal," Kennedy avoided.

"It looked like a bear to me," exclaimed the sheriff.

"We're too late!" Kennedy grabbed at Blount's arm.

Upstairs the piercing, heart-rending scream of some human being in great mental or physical pain broke the silence.

"The thing has struck!" Kennedy muttered.

The piercing human scream suddenly ceased. Kennedy was at the foot of the stair and up two steps at a time again.

The hallway on the second floor was empty. No sounds came from any room. Blount came up, out of breath, and stopped.

Then came the second scream, this time the weird, inhuman scream that started in a low wail and increased until it echoed and re-echoed in the night. It was the scream of death—inhuman, terrifying, unearthly.

It came from a room down the hall. With a spring Kennedy was at the door of that room. The scream was dying away.

"Too late!" he whispered to Blount. "Too late—but perhaps it is best that we are!"

Blount now had the pass-key out of his pocket. He unlocked the door and pushed it open. Kennedy rushed into the room. It was dark and he could see nothing, but from the darkness came the low, dying sound of that inhuman scream. Two yellow-green luminous spots in the darkness!

Kennedy found the light-switch and snapped it on. Blount was standing beside him.

"God save us!" the young sheriff whispered hoarsely, "a cat—a giant cat!"

Lying on the floor, the body wrapped in the bed-clothes, was a human form. It was impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman. But sitting on the shoulder of the person, its teeth firmly implanted in the neck, was a huge gray cat.

"Look out!" Kennedy yelled to Blount.

The huge cat had raised its head and looked at Kennedy and Blount. Its mouth was open and bloody. Its teeth were long and fang-like.

The creature's body doubled for a spring.

Kennedy's automatic roared. The bullet caught the great cat in the head just as it started to spring. Its body stiffened.

An unearthly scream came from it. The body fell back, quivered a little and lay still.

"I don't under—it's infernal—it's all so damned unreal!" stammered Blount. "Who is that in the bed-clothes?"

"The murderer of Coulter and Branford," said Kennedy quietly.

"But the cat?" Blount was still stunned. "What about the cat?"

"The means used to commit a perfect murder," Kennedy explained casually. "Rather a long story—too long for now."

Blount continued to stare at the dead person in the bed-clothes. Then he shuddered, bit his lip, walked over and pulled the clothes from the face.

"Miss Worthington!" he exclaimed in a low whisper. "It can't be possible!"

"But it is possible," said Kennedy, "only it doesn't happen to be Miss Worthington. That was simply a name used for convenience up here to murder Coulter and Branford. Her real name was Lucille Wainwright, a distant relative in the Wainwright family."

"She just slipped in from the doctor's," muttered Condon in the doorway.

Pale-faced McGuire back of him turned and fled up to his room.

Blount started to pull the bed-clothes back over the face of the dead woman. As he did so clumsily the sheet brushed the blood on the neck. Two little black holes were there, caused by the cat's teeth. He shuddered and walked to the door.

As he passed the table he saw a duplicate pass-key on it.

"The instant that cat came into the room," said Kennedy, "she knew the game was up—and deliberately let the cat complete the death list!"

"I'll call a deputy, Kennedy, to guard the body," said Blount. "I'm going down —to get a breath of fresh air!"

12. The Story of the Beast

FIVE minutes later Kennedy sat in the little private office downstairs with Condon and Sheriff Blount. Blount was still pale. Condon wore a perplexed look.

Kennedy had the messages on the desk and had taken the books and other stuff out from where he had locked them up.

"German criminology, Condon," Kennedy was explaining, "records in large number the cases of murder by the Sino-Cat. I brought along a book from the library at the Police Academy. Briefly and clearly stated, the Sino-Cat is a huge ferocious blood-sucking cat, although literally the term means a cat from China, or the Malay Peninsula. Out in our own country districts we find similar cats killing chickens and sucking eggs. The Sino-Cat, given a chance, will suck the blood of a human being."

Kennedy fingered the pages of the book.

"They approach so softly," he went on, "that the victim is seldom conscious of what is going on until the cat has a firm hold on the neck and it is too late. The cat will crawl on a sleeping person, then suddenly strike for the jugular vein, and suck the blood like a vampire."

Blount was slowly shaking his head, shivering.

"The blood-sucking cat," Kennedy continued, "is far more prevalent than is generally believed. It is particularly so in Asia. In our cats it is just a perverted twist. In Asia it's a terrible reversion to type. And the use of such cats to kill people has been known for ages. In western Europe it has undoubtedly given rise to many vampire legends and beliefs. The application of the poison on the fangs and claws is possible because of the ease in giving a cat an antidote, and also because this particular poison is deadly only in the blood stream, not in the digestive

tract. In the first attack on Coulter Miss Worthington tried to make her beast kill without the poison. It failed, and she resorted to the more dangerous and deadly expedient, about which she had read."

He turned to the books.

"When I was in New York I visited Miss Worthington's apartment. I found there many books with marked passages on poisons; several on the subject of vampires and cats. I suppose it was from these books she devised her diabolical plan of killing the three men who stood in her way to a fortune."

"And at last the cat turned on her?" Condon queried.

Kennedy nodded. "Yes. Having been to her room many times before, and always associating her presence with food, it sprang through the open transom. Deprived of blood so long, it turned on its owner; that's all."

He paused.

"As I explained to Blount, Miss Worthington's name really was Lucille Wainwright. She knew the secret of Coulter, Branford and Nelson. I can believe that her discovery of that cavern down in the cellar gave her the first idea about hiding a blood-sucking cat there. The other parts of her plan were easily worked out, like allowing the cat to crawl along the narrow ledge to an open window, then drawing it back with a long leash before it could be discovered. In each case there was an empty room next to that of the murder victim. And the murderess, by means of her pass-key, was able to gain admission to all the rooms."

Blount nodded.

"The screaming of the cat," Kennedy continued, "was caused by the fact that its victims died almost instantly when the poison was injected into the blood stream. The cat, with a good hold on the jugular vein, was angered when the blood flow stopped, as it naturally would after death."

Sheriff Blount wet his lips and continued to regard Kennedy as someone uncanny. "But," he asked, "how in the world did you happen to suspect her?"

"I suspected her from the first," Kennedy replied, "when, as you'll remember if you think back, she came running down the hall, screaming she had seen something black go from Madam Certi's room. Well, it so happened that she came from a different direction than Madam Certi's room. I figured if one part of her story was a lie, it was all lies. The finding of the pieces of leather strap gave me a hunch about an animal. The murderess evidently wanted to convey that impression—a tactical blunder on her part. For somehow I immediately associated a cat with Miss Worthington. Another thing. Those roundish footprints in the cellar. I knew at once they were faked. Some person was wearing something to make weird footprints. Their size gave away the fact it was a woman. Madam Certi was too fat to move as that person did. Mrs. Pilcher didn't have the strength."

"SO," BLOUNT said, admiringly, "you put a lot of things together and suspected Miss Worthington. I am dumb."

"Oh, not so dumb, Sheriff. It really wasn't until I gained entrance to the apartment of Lucille Wainwright in New York, saw pictures and handwriting that corresponded to Miss Worthington's face and her handwriting on the register here that I was certain. After that, it was merely a matter of figuring out how the murders had actually been committed."

"She faked the hysterics," Condon considered, "went to Doctor Greeley's, then sneaked back here, to get Godfrey Nelson."

Kennedy nodded, and Condon went on. "But Madam Certi and the Pilchers?"

"Take the Pilchers first," Kennedy replied. "Very simple. The murder of Coulter put them in a bad spot. The truth is, Mr. and Mrs. Pilcher are not the respectable young married couple you believed them to be. They are blackmailers. I found letters to prove it, and Mrs. Pilcher knows I have them. They came here to blackmail Coulter and Branford. Their transom was open the night of the Coulter murder. Miss Worthington just tossed in a piece of the leather strap such as I found in Coulter's room and down in the cellar, a piece torn and chewed by the cat. She was wise to their blackmail scheme and took advantage of it. It was the fact she knew I knew so much and it might incriminate her that drove Mrs. Pilcher to attempt suicide. The disgrace would ruin both of them."

"And Madam Certi?" Blount inquired.

"Just a publicity-seeking old fool," laughed Kennedy. "The same applies to Professor Mundo. If Madam could stage something and get by with it, she knew when I solved the case, she could claim part of the credit and her reputation would be made. Only unfortunately the second murder frightened them out of their wits."

Blount was dumfounded.

"When people kill with Sino-Cats, they got me beat!" he admitted. "I had it figured out either old Peter did it or that slicker, Burroughs Matthews."

Kennedy smiled. "Old Peter was just suspicious of everyone. That accounts for his strange disappearances. Matthews had stumbled over the old lone grave. His curiosity gave him a hunch but he didn't know what it was. He was there at the lone grave when Miss Worthington, dressed as a man, tried to kill me."

"I say, Kennedy, but, disguise or no disguise, she wasn't strong enough to carry away that brown stone!" Matthews had stuck his head in the door and was listening. "There was another there. How about it?"

Far up under the eaves of the hotel came the echo of a shot. Before they could start to locate it, Old Peter was running breathless down from the quarters assigned to the help.

"It—it's Mr. McGuire—shot hisself!" he gasped.

"The answer to your question, Matthews, is there," Kennedy remarked quietly. "McGuire was really the secret husband of Miss Worthington, a crooked, smart London solicitor."

"Hope I don't dream of blood-sucking cats," shivered the sheriff uncomfortably.

"I've a long drive ahead of me tonight to New York," Kennedy smiled back. "Do you know what I think would do you a lot of good? Let's go out in the bar and have a night-cap!"

"Did they for a moment think they could defeat the greatest war lord in the world?"

Yellow Doom

By ROBERT H. LEITFRED

A thrill-tale of the final war against the invading hordes of Asia—a tale of super-science, and death and destruction raining down out of the sky

A LUMINOUS streak of flame curved down the slant of sky toward a rocky headland that jutted out into the Pacific Ocean.

It fell with a hissing rush toward the scattered buildings of the United States naval station at San Diego. No one in the immediate vicinity saw from where it

came. Nor did anyone see it strike. But a bare second after that small streak of flame had exploded into a larger flame, men saw with startled eyes the miracle of burning metal.

Licking flames gathered at the base of the steel mast nearest the ocean, crawled insidiously up the latticed frame of steel, turned it red, then white. The glowing heat sapped the strength of the metal. The mast collapsed, dragging the antenna wires with it. The strange flame followed the copper wires to the second mast, enveloped it from the top, and burned swiftly downward to its concrete base. A matter of minutes, and there was nothing but the tangled wreckage of the broadcasting towers.

No one from the ground had seen the swift descent of the luminous streak of flame. Yet two pairs of eyes had seen it from across the breadth of a continent, from a high-flung tower in New York, thousands of miles away. Ether-vision had accomplished the miracle.

"It's come, Karl," proclaimed Aaron Carruthers in a tense voice. "The thing we have watched for. The menace we have warned our Government against. Look! San Diego is without its air communication. And it's my guess that the same thing is happening to the other naval bases along the west coast."

The speaker surged to his feet before the complicated mechanism of the ether-vision panel. This young scientist was a little above medium in height, and his eyes were those of a dreamer, a searcher. They were also those of a man who had seen strange and startling things. At present they were grim, thoughtful.

"Sit down, Aaron," spoke his assistant, Karl Danzig. "We haven't traced that fireball yet."

Carruthers sat down, and slowly began to twist the dial controlling the directional antenna. His eyes burned feverishly at what he saw.

Out of the blue above the glowing steel masts, at such altitude as to be invisible from the naval station, a tiny, wasp-like plane circled slowly. Through powerful binoculars its pilot observed the blighting effect of his strange bomb.

Apparently satisfied that his task had been completed according to the desire of the powers he served, he masked his slant, oriental eyes in a glow of satisfaction, and headed his wasp-like plane out to sea.

Across the magnetic screen of the ether-vision ray flowed other scenes, all alike as to detail—naval stations at San Pedro, San Francisco, and the inland air base at Seattle. Without warning they had been cut off from the outside world.

"Karl!" Carruthers' voice was tense. "Try again, will you, and see if you can get me Langham's secretary in Washington. In the meantime I'll try to trace these strange planes so as to locate the carrier ship at sea."

As Danzig picked up the electronic phone, the commercial broadcasts of a continent, from the Panama Canal to Alaska, shifted automatically to Federal control as the Intelligence chiefs of the various nations clamped down hard in a sudden censorship.

THINGS seemed normal for a time, but for a short time only.

There was a restless murmur in the air. It was like the rustle of waves moving over the sands at high tide. It began at the nation's capital in Washington and spread fanwise north, south and west. It was the cry of a people confronted with catastrophe, with fear.

Sirens moaned along the grand trunk highway between Washington and New York. The nation seethed with turmoil. Men with gaunt faces peered anxiously

into the crowded airways above the city's high towers. Men with hollow eyes crouched before the screens of television news that flashed the faces and voices of men who controlled the destinies of several nations—ambassadors from Central America, Mexico and Canada. Long ago had these nations absorbed the creed of their sister republic, a nation on whom they could depend in a crisis—the United States of America.

The year was 2000. The day was the seventh of Jupiter, the thirteenth month of the earth's new calendar. The hour was late in the afternoon as the sun dropped westward in a blood-red haze. A faint afterglow lingered in the sky like the portentous shadow of doom.

What had happened? No one knew exactly except the young scientist, Aaron Carruthers. He had known what was coming and had warned official Washington. The Government had ignored his warnings. It had scoffed at what he called his ether-vision ray. Even in the year 2000 men were skeptical of the revolutionary advances being made in science.

Carruthers thought of his past rebuffs, as he climbed aboard a stream-lined rocket ship bound for Washington. He was still thinking about it a half-hour later as he paused before the building on Pennsylvania Avenue wherein the Government of a great nation was centered. And while he waited in the outer offices of the Bureau of Intelligence, destiny moved forward.

In a room high above the avenue, in the same building, twelve dignified men had assembled. They represented the super-cabinet Government. The old order had passed. Congress and Senate no longer existed. As a relic of the past the two Houses had been discarded for a smaller group. And these twelve men were the Government, subject only to the will of the President.

They sat around a long table, in the center of which was built a television screen. Wordlessly they awaited their chief, who had summoned them into executive session.

He came, through a panel door in the wall, quietly and unannounced, a tall, gaunt man, smooth of jaw, sharp-featured, with a mane of iron-gray hair brushed severely back from his intellectual forehead. He acknowledged with a slight nod their courtesy in rising.

"Be seated, gentlemen." His voice was low, soft, a Southern drawl.

In turn he faced each man of his cabinet—the conservative, the liberal, the reactionary. But whatever their beliefs, he read the same thought in the eyes of every man — a determination to stand shoulder to shoulder against the menace shadowing their country.

"The day of reckoning has arrived," began the President. "War! It came without any ultimatum until after the first blow had been struck. Yellow doom overshadows our nation."

He rustled a single sheet of paper held between his fingers. "We'll discuss the contents of this ultimatum in a few moments. But first I want to acquaint you with the situation. . . ."

His voice trailed away.

The screen of the Continental news-vision glowed whitely. A shadowy figure began to form. It changed rapidly to the head and shoulders of an Asiatic war lord. There was no mistaking the cold, slanting eyes, the cruel lips, and the needle-pointed mustaches. The face emerging from the electrical impulses of the television screen was none other than that of Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti.

The war lord's thin lips twisted sardonically as he spoke. "To the President,

his super-cabinet, and to the peoples of the United States," he bowed, "I extend greetings."

He paused for a moment, then continued.

"The time has arrived when the coffers of our Asiatic dynasty need replenishing. We have come to you for what we need. It will be quite useless to rise up in arms against us. Our armies are like the sands of the sea, our air service like black clouds. Our ships, vast fleets, are already at your doors."

His second pause was more significant.

"Your President has our ultimatum. Ten hours we give him to comply with our demands. Should he fail to do so, destruction and death will be loosed such as the world has never witnessed. Ten hours. That is positively the limit of time we will allow."

Once more he bowed. "Then his slant eyes, his cruel lips, and his needle-pointed mustaches faded into cold silver as the screen went dead.

"A clever man," shrugged the President. "Using our Continental broadcast band. By now nearly everyone in the country should know the danger we are in. . . . Listen, gentlemen, now that Marshal Zaryoti has finished, to a gist of his ultimatum."

He tapped the desk with finger tips. "First, he demands eighty percent of the gold in our treasury. Second, eighty percent of the gold in National, State and Federal Reserve banks. Third, he seeks full control of our oil, ore, steel and automotive industries. And," he finished, "he insists on a puppet president to head our Government while I go into voluntary exile."

FARNSWORTH, Secretary of the Navy, lunged to his feet. "Not while I head the navy, Mr. President. We'll crush this thing. . . ."

An automatic message recorder began to click. The President tore the printed words from the paper roll. "There's your answer, Farnsworth."

Secretary Farnsworth paled as he read the message aloud. "Fleet steamed out of San Pedro and San Diego at two a. m. on the morning of the seventh day of Jupiter as per secret orders. Signed: Admiral Young, commanding."

"Well?" demanded the President.

Farnsworth chewed impatiently on his lower lip. "I issued no such order, gentlemen."

The President shrugged. "Undoubtedly. Probably the same thing happened to our Air Service at about the same time."

Gettering, grizzled secretary of the Eastern and Western air fleets, jumped to his feet. "Mr. President," he shouted. "I received the order signed by you——"

"Never mind finishing," snapped the President. "I sent no order regarding air maneuvers. Where are our air fleets?"

"The Eastern fleet is scattered over the Atlantic. The Western has been ordered to hold secret maneuvers at Hawaii and the Philippines."

"The Western fleet can be recalled, can't it?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"According to the orders I received, they were not to use their wireless. For twenty-four hours they were to keep in touch with each other by a system of flare lights. It was supposed to be a practise long since abandoned. Anyhow, those were the orders I received."

The President smiled bleakly. "Well, we still have our old-fashioned army, such as it is, and I have every reason to believe our soldiers can still shoot."

"The use of rifles was abandoned three years ago," informed the Secretary of

War. "Most of the men were transferred to tank, transport and chemical service."

The eyes of the chief executive closed wearily. "I had forgotten. Will someone call in the Chief of Intelligence? Ten hours is a short time. Prompt action is essential if we are to survive."

Langham, tall, morose, Chief of the Bureau of Intelligence, entered the conference room. With him was Aaron Carruthers. No one paid the slightest attention to the young scientist. All eyes were riveted on the sphinx-like face of Langham.

The President spoke. "Did your screen pick up Zaryoti?"

"It did, Mr. President."

"You are aware, of course, what conversation took place in this council chamber?"

Langham nodded. "It's my business to hear everything."

"Very well. We have less than ten hours to prepare for war with a mighty power—ten hours before the enemy begins to close in on us along the Pacific seaboard. The bulk of our air force, the powerful Western fleet, is thousands of miles away and out of radio communication. And our sea fleet is seventeen hours from land."

"I understand, perfectly."

"It is also apparent, Langham, that you have not properly guarded this building. Orders have been stolen, signatures forged—all inside work. Zaryoti has outwitted us at the very start."

Carruthers made a sudden gesture. It was an instinctive reflex, the sort of movement one would make in the darkness to ward off an object he could not see, but could almost feel. His eyes at that moment were on the floor. Suddenly they lifted upward. He backed away from the spot, his clenched hands quivering, his breath snagging somewhere in the back of his throat.

His fingers closed over Langham's arm. "Wait!" he cautioned, tensely. "Say nothing. Not now." His deep-set eyes were veiled with warning shadows.

"Who is this man?" demanded the President.

"Aaron Carruthers," answered Langham. "He wired in the first news of disaster. He's the one man who knows——"

"Nonsense," brusked the President. "Get him out of this room. This discussion——"

"Sorry to interrupt," broke in Langham, imperturbably, "but we need him in this crisis. Once we turned him down. That was a grave mistake. To do so now would be to invite disaster of the first magnitude."

"Enough," snapped the President, irritably. "My orders are to send him from this room. At once."

The eyes of Aaron Carruthers hardened. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. I should have known better than to offer my services a second time. I'll leave as you have ordered. But——"

His voice held a threat of menace to come. "I want to warn you, Mr. President, and also the members of your super-cabinet, that there is an agent of Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti present in this room."

The President and his cabinet eyed the speaker as if he had suddenly gone mad.

"I hope I've made myself clear," finished the young scientist. "If I haven't, I'll repeat my words. There is an agent of Marshal Zaryoti present in this room listening to everything being said and planned. No. Don't glare at me or at one another. The man I refer to can not be seen—he's invisible."

"Langham!" The President's drawling voice cut through the dazed silence fol-

lowing Carruthers' last words. "Are you certain this man hasn't lost his reason?"

The sphinx-like face of Langham had not changed in the slightest. If the news came as a shock to him, his face revealed no sign of it. "I know Carruthers quite well, Mr. President. As I remarked before, he was the man who gave my office the first news of the destruction of the wireless stations along the Pacific. I know, also, because of his help, how the destruction was accomplished, and the nearest base of operations being used by Zaryoti. He beat my own operatives both in time and in value of information. I hope that answers your question."

THE President turned his eyes full upon Carruthers for the first time. It was plain that he was trying to gain control of himself during a very trying period.

"What made you think, Carruthers, that Zaryoti has an agent in this room?"

The young scientist was staring queerly into space. His lips moved slightly. "Lock the doors, Langham. Quick!" With three quick strides he stood before the President. "I saw his shadow, Mr. President, when he passed in front of one of these wall lights. He's still in this room, I tell you. Within inches of all of us."

"Langham, get this maniac out of the room," thundered Farnsworth. "We're wasting valuable time. There are only nine hours left. Get him out, I tell you."

Carruthers moistened his lips. "And the remaining nine hours will be worse than wasted, Farnsworth, if you discuss your plans against Zaryoti in this room—now!"

The faces of several cabinet members blanched. They turned questioning eyes on the face of their leader. But before he could speak, something materialized out of thin air—a long, narrow blade of shining steel.

A claw-like hand was visible gripping its hilt. That was all that could be seen. The blade struck downward in a jerking movement toward the heart of the President.

Carruthers leaped. There followed a soft thud, then a harder one as the young scientist collided with the invisible body. The members of the cabinet drew back in horror at something they could not see or understand.

They could see Carruthers struggling violently with empty air. To all appearances he had gone stark mad. They started toward him, Langham leading.

Then they saw the President stagger, clap his hands to a crimson spot below his heart, and slump to the floor.

"Langham! Quick!" Carruthers' voice was muffled. "Here. I've got him!"

There was a ripping snarl like tearing silk, and the body of the President's assailant was revealed from the waist up.

A blunt object in Langham's hand swished downward. It struck a smooth-shaven head with stunning force. The agent of Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti collapsed with a grunt.

Carruthers rose slowly to his feet, ripping the invisible folds of cloth from the lower part of the oriental's body. His eyes were bright with the excitement of discovery. In his absent-mindedness he almost forgot the prisoner.

But Langham hadn't. Two of his own men appeared in an open doorway. "Lock this spy up," he ordered. "And keep a strong guard over him. He's tricky. Don't let him escape. I'll question him later."

He turned to the wounded chief executive. The President was unconscious. Langham summoned a surgeon. The

President, still unconscious, was carried to his own private chambers.

"Well," shrugged the Intelligence Chief. "We still have our problem to face."

Farnsworth pounded the table for order. "According to the terms of our new constitution, Langham, I immediately assume control of the chief executive's power in the event of sickness or death."

Langham nodded. "That is the law."

"Very well. Now listen. Your job is to obey any orders I issue. Is that clear?"

"Quite."

"Furthermore, I consider myself and my associates quite capable of handling the present situation. The President and myself turned down this man Carruthers' crazy inventions some time ago. And we're turning them down a second time. Carruthers, you can go. My word is final."

"Don't be bull-headed, Farnsworth," snapped Langham. "If you've got a grain of sense in your head, you'd know that our nation is licked right now. There isn't a thing we can do to stop Zaryoti."

"We've got our sea fleet."

"I'll not deny that. But where is it? Miles away at sea. Before you could get your ships back to the west coast, Zaryoti's own fleet would have anchored in our harbors. And what would happen to our port cities of San Diego, San Pedro and San Francisco?"

"I'm recalling the fleet at once," gritted Farnsworth.

Langham swung on Gettering. "What about the silly order you passed on to your air squadrons? Bah! You may be a super-cabinet but you act like a lot of morons. Try and get your air fleet back and see how far you get."

"I had no idea those orders were forged," replied Gettering.

"Enough!" snapped Farnsworth. "We'll get along without their wireless equipment. We'll send a rocket ship——"

"If you know anything at all, Farnsworth," broke in Langham, "you'd know that even a rocket ship couldn't make contact, even under perfect conditions, in less than six hours. Six hours for the air fleet to return would make twelve. We have less than nine before Zaryoti strikes."

FARNSWORTH's face purpled. With a visible effort he held his temper in check. "For the benefit of the rest of our cabinet, Langham, I'll put it this way. What is it you demand of us?"

"That you listen to me as Chief of War Intelligence."

"All right. We're listening."

"There are two things we can do," continued Langham. "We can surrender and agree to the terms of Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti, which means our utter subjugation, or," he paused significantly, "we can place the country's defense in the hands of this young scientist, Aaron Carruthers. Whatever he demands must be granted."

Farnsworth grunted sarcastically. "And what are this man's demands?"

"I demand," announced Carruthers, "the co-operation of the Secretaries of Air and Navy fleets. Also I'll want all this scare-broadcasting by television stopped at once. The two secretaries and Langham will return with me to my laboratory in New York. From that spot we'll conduct our defense of America."

"Impossible," shrugged Farnsworth, glaring at Langham. "What does this scientist know about national defense?"

"What do any of *you* know?" countered the Chief of Intelligence. "We're up against a shrewd, cunning military genius employing the most modern of ideas and weapons. Carruthers holds the

key—and the only key—to the situation now confronting us."

Farnsworth and the others jumped to their feet. As they did so there was a scraping noise outside the door. It sagged open. One of Langham's operatives leaned weakly against the door-frame. His face was drawn with pain, and there was a crimson bruise on his forehead. His eyes sought Langham's.

"Sorry, Chief," he whispered huskily. "He . . . the prisoner . . . got away. Killed Jerry. And I . . . I couldn't hold——" The voice faded into a confused jumble of words. Abruptly the man collapsed in a crumpled heap—stone dead.

There followed a confused jumble of voices.

Farnsworth rapped for order. "Gentlemen, it must be obvious to you that Langham's men allowed one of Zaryoti's spies to escape, and it cost them their lives. His men, though keen and capable, can not cope with these Asiatics. Why, then, should we turn over all authority and initiative to this scientist who knows even less of their cunning, and expect to save our nation from disaster?"

Langham's drawl cut through the babel of voices around the long table. "Do whatever you please, Farnsworth. But heaven help you if you fail!"

He turned to the young scientist. "You may go now, Carruthers. Your country does not need your services. Sorry I wasn't able to convince the others."

Carruthers rose to his feet. "Thanks, Langham. Good evening, gentlemen."

HARDLY had Aaron Carruthers left to return to his laboratory in New York, when the television screen on the long table glowed, and the yellow face of the Asiatic war lord, Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti, became visible to every member of the assembled cabinet. His voice crackled shrilly as he hurled a fresh challenge over the ether:

"People of the United States. Zaryoti, Emperor of a combined Asia, is ready to strike. Eight hours remain for you to submit to my ultimatum. But to prove I have the power to destroy, I will begin at once, striking simultaneously in three places, Los Angeles, Washington and the great power projects of Niagara. Zaryoti has spoken."

High in the air above the capitol whined a siren of alarm. Its strident scream penetrated the room where the super-cabinet faced its first major crisis.

"Bluff!" thundered Farnsworth. He seized a telephone and spoke briefly. "Chief of Naval Operations. Hurry!"

There was a succession of clicks. Farnsworth resumed. "Recall the red and blue fleets out in the Pacific. Order them to steam coastward at full speed. Definite orders will be sent to the admiral in command during the next hour. If there is any question——"

The lights in the room went suddenly black. Farnsworth felt the instrument in his hands grow useless. He shouted. He pounded it against the table. But nothing he could do would restore its usefulness. The wires were dead.

A clamor of bells, whistles and human voices profaned the night. The moan of the sirens increased. Then the city began to rock as if in the throes of an earthquake.

Jamming and pushing, the members of the super-cabinet blundered out into the corridor. At the far end of it were French doors leading to an iron balcony. Onto this balcony they crowded, staring at the wild confusion below.

It was a night never to be forgotten. Overhead were blackness and shifting clouds with only a few stars visible.

Lights from passing cars weaved jerkily as the pavement buckled under the terrific pressure of explosions. Men and women cried out in panic. A building crashed. A second followed it in a cloud of smoking debris. There was a grating rasp of concrete sliding from the walls of a near-by building.

Langham pushed forward to the railing. His eyes were hard. His lips were twisted into a sardonic smile. They parted after a moment. Two words escaped them. "Atomic bombs."

"Eh?" grunted Farnsworth.

"Atomic bombs," repeated the Intelligence Chief. "I thought the invention had been lost. But no. Zaryoti has it. We, our Government, turned it down. You remember, Farnsworth. You were against it. Too powerful. Too fantastic. Well, it looks as if the inventor sold it to the Asiatics. Another blunder."

Farnsworth turned away. "Get me a page, somebody," he ordered. "I've got to get a message through to the Chief of Naval Operations."

"Listen, Farnsworth." Langham grabbed the Acting President by the arm. "Are you altogether blind and deaf? Listen to the mob surging along the avenue. Those people are headed for the open spaces if they can find them. They're terror-stricken. Our machinery of defense has broken down."

"Shut up!"

"It's my job to point out these things. Do you understand what's happened? Our power system has failed. That means no communication of any sort except by courier. And where will we find couriers? They went out of date fifty years ago."

"The fleet!" insisted Farnsworth. "They must be recalled. A way must be found to communicate with them. At once. We must send a rocket ship——"

Gettering's harsh laugh broke in. "We're licked, Farnsworth. There's not a chance in the world of getting in touch with them. Amateur television sets will soon be reporting the same disaster from the west and north—that is, if they have the power to operate."

Several others of the cabinet added their voices to Gettering's. "Gettering and Langham are right, Farnsworth. We've got to do something, and do it at once before the whole country is destroyed."

Farnsworth's huge bulk weaved threateningly toward those members who were siding in with Langham. "You men listen to me. I know——"

"You know very little," cut in Langham. "I tell you the country is headed for a smash unless you act reasonable. Either run up the white flag and give in to Zaryoti, or——"

"Or what?"

"Carruthers. He's the one man who has the power to squelch this thing. We lost the atomic bombs by your opposition. We may lose Carruthers and his ether-vision ray. Don't make the same mistake twice. . . ."

A ball of fire curved down the sky scarcely a hundred yards away. It struck the pavement. There was no sharp explosion such as men were accustomed to hear when cordite or TNT let loose. There was only a dull first explosion, followed by a deeper and still deeper rumbling as the bomb forced its way down to bedrock.

Abruptly the building housing the cabinet and executive offices began to sway, first to the east, then to the west. There was something breath-taking in the way the structure weaved on its foundations. Men clung to the railing with wan faces and staring eyes.

"Get inside," shouted Langham.

They followed him like cattle. Lang-

ham found a clerk with a flashlight and took it from him. They returned to the conference room. It was impossible to talk intelligibly. Their minds were too upset by the constant jarrings of the atomic bombs.

The strain on the steel framework of the building must have been enormous, but though it weaved dangerously, it did not collapse. Time became an eternity of tortured minutes that extended into the longest hour these men had ever passed through. And to the inhabitants of the nation's capital, time was endless. It was as if the world had come to an end.

Then power came surging through the cables as workers repaired the line breaks. The lights of the city glowed dimly on desolation and ruin. Men and women moved through the ruins like jackals, searching for lost ones, fearing the nearness of the Asiatics, not knowing what to do or which way to turn to escape the wrath of the Asiatic war lord.

Seven hours till doom—the yellow doom of destruction.

FARNSWORTH sat at the end of a long table. In place of the super-cabinet were two men—Langham and Gettering. The message recorder was clicking off catastrophes. Los Angeles was in flames. Her great aqueducts had been bombed, and flood waters were raging throughout the city. The capital was in a state of chaos. Of the power projects of Niagara, no news sifted in. They had evidently escaped.

And there was nothing these men could do but wait for their television call to get through to the red and blue fleets at sea. The call came through. A light glowed momentarily on the switchboard close to the screen. The three men leaned forward. The screen began to brighten with the projected image of the person soon to speak.

"Operator, operator," called Farnsworth. "Attention. Keep every channel open for incoming reports. All right. We're waiting."

A cloud moved over the television screen. There was a faint click, then the crash of waves against the steel plates of a ship far out in the Pacific. Abruptly the interior of the chief radio officer's headquarters on the flagship melted into the panel.

"Admiral Young," crisped Farnsworth. "At once."

The scene shifted as the officer plugged in on the fleet commander's line. Almost at once the clean-shaven face of Admiral Young appeared in the glowing screen. He was sitting before an exact duplicate of the screen before Farnsworth. Both men could see each other plainly as they talked.

"Invasion has begun," said Farnsworth. "Zaryoti, and a combined Asia. We have his ultimatum. Less than seven hours before hostilities. He's closing in on us. It's the end, I fear. We'll need you. Turn around. Break the fleet into squadrons. Hurry! How long before——"

"Just a moment, Farnsworth." The fleet commander issued a brief order to a subordinate. "All right. We'll be heading for land in five minutes. We lost eight hours owing to a breakdown of one of the first-line ships. That makes us just that much nearer."

"Roughly, how many hours away?"

"Seven hours from San Diego. Longer to San Pedro and San Francisco."

"Good. Can you raise the air fleet from your present position?"

"Tried to an hour ago. No answer to our signals."

"Could you reach them with a scout plane?"

"Not in the darkness unless we had their exact bearings."

"Very well. Keep your operators alert. If we can locate the Asiatic fleet, we'll so inform you. Good-night."

Farnsworth's face was haggard as he turned from the television screen. His ace card had failed him. He had to admit himself beaten unless——

"Langham," he admitted. "I've been a fool."

"Meaning?"

"Regarding Carruthers. I'll take a chance. Everything is organized as well as could be expected. Land batteries ready. Detector crews at their stations. All available navy planes of the Atlantic fleet mobilized and ready to take the air."

His eyes narrowed with worry. "Zaryoti has the edge on us with his atomic bombs. In a pinch our system of artificial fog will help. But what we need most are fighting-ships of the first rank."

"And they are all headed toward the Philippines," finished Gettering, "with special orders not to use their wireless sets. Part of their training. Designed to keep their movements secret from those who might listen in."

Langham spoke briefly into a message recorder machine, then stood erect. "I've commandeered a rocket ship from the Southern Transport. We'll leave for New York and Carruthers' laboratory at once."

MIDNIGHT found the three men ascending to the top floor of a towering skyscraper close to the Hudson River. Carruthers met them as they emerged from the cage that had whisked them upward.

"The gentlemen have changed their minds," announced Langham.

Carruthers nodded. "I understand. I heard everything that occurred in the cabinet room. I also witnessed the action of the atomic bombs. But the time grows short. This way, please."

Carruthers' friend and assistant, Karl Danzig, was waiting beside an enormous steel door as the four men filed down a long corridor. A moment later it closed behind them.

The eyes of the Government officials became wide with surprize at the paneled whiteness of the room. Most of the far side was taken up with electrical and atomic machines, dynamos, generators and enclosed motors of an advanced and unknown type.

Overhead, concealed lights made the room glow with the same brightness as the sun. And there wasn't a window in any of the walls to mar their smoothness.

Deftly, swiftly, Carruthers seated his guests around the complicated mechanism of the ether-vision machine. In the hands of each man he placed an instrument similar to a microphone.

"These instruments, gentlemen," he told them, "are electronic phones. Keep them away from your mouths. They're extremely sensitive. The moment you raise them to your face to speak your call number, you are immediately connected with the main trunk lines of the city. You will notice the complete absence of wires. And they're fool-proof."

He glanced at his watch and frowned. "Attention now. We're going out into space. Not to fixed limits of wireless antennæ, but into the limitless space of ether."

He seated himself before the complicated dials of his ether-vision panel, thrust a switch forward with his foot, clicked two with his fingers, and slowly began to revolve a dial.

To his left crouched Karl Danzig, eyes and ears alert to the smooth perfection of strange motors. A strange experiment

was about to start. How it would end no one could guess.

The silver surface of a magnetic vision screen became clouded as if actuated by a miniature whirlwind of flying dust particles. Slowly its brightness faded into dull gray, and from gray to a greenish blue.

Strange noises came out of the sound-producer—the dull pound of waves, the throb of engines, and the swishing of parted waters as they flowed along the prow of a battleship. Owing to the darkness, the image was barely visible—a mere blob of shadow. Carruthers switched on the current generated by the strange motors. Below the screen a battery of infra-red tubes glowed sullenly. Almost at once the greenish-blue on the screen faded.

The blob of a shadow took on a definite form as the blackness of night was flung back. And before the amazed eyes of the watchers appeared the ponderous bulk of a fighting battleship. Every line of her great bulk stood out clearly.

Farnsworth clutched at Langham's arm. "The *Texas*. Unbelievable."

Carruthers' fingers contracted on the directional antenna. The *Texas* faded from the panel. Miles and miles of choppy waves flowed into the screen and dissolved away. The tension increased. Other things became visible.

At first they seemed mere splotches of shadow. Then, as the ether-vision ray brought them closer, the hulls and steel-latticed masts of the Asiatic fleet became clearly recognizable.

Farnsworth was breathing hard. "Zaryoti's ships!" he gasped. "But . . . but where are they? Quick! I've got to know."

Carruthers made a rapid computation of figures on the antenna dial. "Roughly, those ships are five hours away from the *Texas*, but between our own fleet and the mainland."

"Find the air fleet!" broke in Gettering. "You're wasting time."

Carruthers ignored him and wrote several symbols on a sheet of paper which he handed to Farnsworth. "There's the latitude and longitude of Zaryoti's sea fleet. They're massed in a solid phalanx, and from the brownish hue discoloring the screen, I would say that they are concealed, not by fog, but by an ingenious and continuous flow of smoke."

Farnsworth nodded and raised the electronic phone to his lips. In a low yet clear voice he began to give orders to the Chief of Naval Operations that would start the American fleet to where Zaryoti's ships lay hidden in the brown smoke-screen.

SLOW minutes dragged as anxious eyes stared into the cloudiness of the magnetic screen. Farnsworth had finished giving orders and was hunched forward close to the screen once more. Gettering was breathing harshly, clasping and unclasping his hands.

A faint drumming emanated from the sound-producer beneath the ether-vision panel. The screen became agitated with what looked like whirling nebulæ. Scarlet lightnings crisscrossed its surface.

Carruthers locked the directional antenna in place, and the revealing beam of the ether-vision concentrated on a single point. Into this field floated a dark mass.

The lightnings crisscrossing the magnetic screen were recognizable now as signal flares. Through them, the far-flung squadrons of planes were contacting one another as they shouldered through the night.

The long fingers of Carruthers made a slight adjustment on the control keys. At once the infra-red tubes flung back the darkness, and the wings of the closest ship became visible to the watchers.

Again a swift adjustment on the con-

trol board. The plane on which the beam was focused melted into the screen until there was nothing to be seen except its glistening body.

The quartz windows of the observer's lookout glowed brightly; then they disappeared and the startled watchers found themselves peering into a lighted cabin.

Carruthers broke the spell. "Gettering, who's in command?"

Gettering leaned forward. "General Reilly."

"This his ship?"

The Air Secretary shook his head. His hands clasped and unclasped a second time. "No. You'll find Reilly at the very top of the formation flying at point."

"East or west on the screen?"

Gettering studied the markings on the plane. "This is a third-group plane. Its position should be on the right. I'd say move slightly to the east and get your ray higher up."

More slow minutes dragged as the anxious search for the commanding officer of the missing air fleet continued. Cabin after cabin was examined in a long, careful search. And when they had almost despaired of finding the lead ship of the Western air fleet, the grim face of a middle-aged officer flowed into the magnetic screen.

"There he is," breathed Gettering. "That's General Reilly."

The general sat behind a metal table bolted to the floor. He was staring downward at a map. Except for an aide, a younger officer, he was alone in the forward cabin.

Gettering leaned forward. "Warn him, Carruthers. Quick! A television message."

"Quiet!" snapped Langham. "He had orders not to use his wireless instruments. He might as well be on Mars as far as television waves are concerned."

Gettering sank glumly back in his chair. "But how the devil are we to warn——"

"By positive thought control," announced Carruthers. "What I shall do now is to create electrically induced telepathy."

He turned to his assistant, Danzig. "All right, Karl. Warm up the secondary-band control tubes. If Reilly is the type of officer I think he is, his mind should activate the quartz rod somewhere between the seventeen and nineteen thousand meter range."

Danzig clicked a switch and made a slight adjustment on one of the strange motors beside him. From beneath the control table came the sound as of a mighty wind.

"Cut down the power," ordered Carruthers, "to about six volts."

The sound of the wind faded into a cat-like purr. Carruthers listened intently. All good so far. He turned again to the dials controlling the ether-vision rays.

To the left of the panel, fastened in place with two bands of non-conductive material, was a twelve-inch hollow tube of quartz partly filled with a yellowish liquid chemical. Carruthers' eyes were on the tube. He saw the chemical change from yellow to orange, and from orange to a fiery crimson. Abruptly the liquid in the tube boiled into a smother of bubbles. Then the whole mass inside the quartz rod settled and became the same clear color as the quartz itself.

"What is the dial reading, Karl?"

"Seventeen ninety."

"Seventeen ninety," repeated Carruthers. "Lock the inflow switch so that nothing can happen, and keep a sharp eye on your motors."

Gettering coughed impatiently. "We're wasting time."

"I thought so an hour ago," grunted Farnsworth, "but it didn't help matters

any. We're helpless any way you look at it unless——"

The snap of an electrical switch silenced their voices. The voice of Carruthers cut in. "I'm going to stimulate my mind till it reaches the same mental frequency as that of General Reilly's. There's a tremendous risk involved, so I'm asking you men not to interrupt me during the experiment."

He twisted the dials on the lower edge of the ether-vision panel to the reading given him by Danzig, seventeen hundred and ninety meters. Beside him rested a band of burnished metal shaped something like a headphone set. Carefully he placed this over his head, making certain that the contact points were on the back of his head, and his forehead.

This done, he switched on the current from the motor Danzig was controlling. His body quivered for a moment as strange electrical currents pulsed through every nerve of his body. He was now ready.

HE WAITED for a moment to adjust himself to the quivering impulses shooting through his body, then with parted lips began to speak in a slow monotone.

"Commander Reilly! Commander Reilly! Listen. Forget whatever you're doing at this moment. Forget everything and listen. Look up!"

The general lifted his head and spoke sharply to his aide. "Please don't interrupt me."

The second officer looked blank. "I said nothing, General."

Reilly frowned and returned to his work.

The voice of Carruthers continued, monotonously. "Danger, danger, danger! Do you hear, General Reilly?"

The watchers saw a strange light flash into General Reilly's eyes as he raised his head a second time.

"Queer," they heard him mutter. "I don't understand."

"You must understand," insisted Carruthers, putting all the power of his will behind every spoken word. "Concentrate. Listen."

General Reilly's eyes probed space. His jaw twitched.

Carruthers intoned his warning before the officer had a chance to think or speak.

"Your orders are false. You've been tricked. Understand? Tricked into leaving your country at the mercy of the invaders. Get in communication with your superiors at once. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

Reilly's face paled and he shook his head as if to rid it of something unpleasant. The watchers saw him rise slowly to his feet, stare frowningly about him, then heard him speak.

"Captain," he called to his aide. "I'm worried. Something inside me warns of disaster ahead. Unbidden thoughts fill my mind that have come there without any effort of my own. It's as though these thoughts were being forced upon me."

"Better get some sleep," shrugged the other officer.

"Sleep?" mused the bewildered general. "I wonder."

The face of Aaron Carruthers broke out with cold sweat. He must not fail. He dared not fail. Once more he forced his will out into space on the mind of this officer.

"Listen, General Reilly," he droned. "Grave danger confronts your country. Upon you alone rests the responsibility of saving it in its hour of need. Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti is moving eastward with his yellow invaders. The menace of a combined Asia is threatening our country. Break those orders you received.

They're false. Washington commands you to obey."

General Reilly turned suddenly on his aide. "Send in the chief radio operator, Captain."

"Sorry, General, but the chief operator and his assistant were assigned to another ship of the fleet. Not until we reach the Islands——"

The lights in the laboratory flickered. The remainder of the speaker's words failed. Carruthers twisted uneasily in his chair. Intruders! In the corridor outside the door. His lips twisted to a thin line as he clicked off the switch controlling the ether-vision ray.

"Someone coming down the corridor, Karl. Watch out!"

Danzig lurched to his feet. As he did so the door swung softly inward. A man entered—a man with a shaven head, and with torn clothes. There was no mistaking him. He was the spy who had invaded the cabinet room and who had escaped from Langham's operators.

In his right hand he held a tube of metal. It was thrust in front of his body as he kicked the door shut with his foot.

Carruthers felt his heart constrict. Never had he seen a face so utterly cruel and ruthless. How the spy had reached the top of the building he could not determine, but the fact remained that he was here, and in the room, his beady black eyes gleaming malevolently.

"So!" The man's voice was cultured, smooth, and filled with menace. "I find the brain trust all in one spot. That makes my task easier." He laughed thinly.

Simultaneously Karl Danzig and Gettering sprang forward to seize the intruder. The metal tube whirled in a swift arc, pointing in turn at the body of each man. A blinding violet spark lanced from the tube's hollow core. As if stricken with paralysis, both men sagged to the floor, senseless.

The tube waved menacingly on Farnsworth and Carruthers. "If I have not made my intentions clear," warned the yellow intruder, "it's because you haven't given me time. Make no mistake. I will suffer no interference. I am here to destroy, but not until I have learned the secrets you possess."

Aaron Carruthers leaned back in his chair, his heart hammering painfully. Success had been so close. Now everything looked black and hopeless.

His mind quickened. How could he disarm this man? How?

"What are your demands?" he asked, stalling for time.

The oriental spoke thinly. "Complete stoppage of all information going out of this laboratory."

CARRUTHERS appeared to consider the proposal. What he really did was something entirely different. His eyes swerved momentarily to the wall close to the ether-vision machine. There was an emergency switch—an electrical cut-off to be used in case of a short-circuit.

If he could pull this switch, he might, under cover of darkness, which would immediately follow, get that powerful weapon from his enemy's yellow fingers.

His arms meanwhile were hanging limp at his sides. He worked the right one behind him. As he did so he heard a faint rustle. The cloth of invisibility. It wasn't much, just a torn fragment. But if he could contrive to use it as a shield to cover the movement of his right arm, he might pull that switch. His jaw hardened. He decided to risk the chance. His eyes swerved to Langham in mute appeal.

Langham nodded—a barely perceptible inclination of the head. He smiled grimly on the agent of Zaryoti. "The Marshal is

fortunate in having so determined and resourceful a man in his service. Some day he will rule the world."

"You think so?" The spy seemed for the moment to have forgotten his intention to destroy.

Langham continued to talk against time. "Like your master, you too have brains, and—please point that tube some other direction. It makes me nervous. See. We three men are sitting perfectly quiet. What is it you wish to know?"

Carruthers heard the drone of their voices, but he couldn't sense the meaning. His mind was concentrated on the thing he was trying to do.

Six hours till doom.

He had the cloth from his pocket now. It was hanging limp in his fingers. He wondered if the spy could see the motions of his twitching shoulders. Slowly and with painstaking effort he began to wrap it around his right arm.

Exactly three minutes had elapsed since the spy had entered. To the young scientist it seemed that many hours. He was ready.

Slowly he extended his arm toward the switch. His heart pounded heavily. Were his arm and fingers completely covered with the cloth of invisibility? He dared not look for fear of disclosing his intentions.

Closer and closer to the wall switch moved the arm of the young scientist. In another second he could feel the hard rubber handle barely grazing his finger tips.

The spy's sharp eyes swerved from Langham to Carruthers. The young scientist checked all movement. But he was too late. The cloth of invisibility slipped from his extended arm. The spy saw and understood.

With an inarticulate cry he jerked around. Carruthers lunged sideways. His fingers found the switch, jerked it downward, and followed it with his body.

Through the blackness shutting down upon the laboratory stabbed the flame of destruction. Carruthers felt a devitalizing shock numb his right shoulder. But it failed to halt him.

Gathering his legs beneath him he lunged toward the spot where he had last seen the spy. They crashed to the floor in a tangled heap.

Desperately the young scientist reached for the spy's wrist. The metal tube cracked out a hot spark, missing his face by inches. His fingers closed hard over a yellow hand. Slowly, inexorably, he twisted the spy's wrist.

There came a brittle snapping as of live wires coming in contact with each other. The metal tube crackled three times. Then there was silence except for hard breathing.

Langham's voice cut through the dark. "Carruthers!"

"Okay, Langham. The switch. It's on the wall to the right of my chair."

Langham fumbled for a moment. Then the lights snapped on.

Carruthers staggered to his feet. "Look him over. See if he's still alive. He took three jolts."

"Dead," pronounced Langham. "Gettering and Danzig are merely shocked. Danzig is beginning to show signs of life."

Carruthers took the precaution to lock the door leading to the corridor. Then he hurried to his chemical laboratory and mixed a strong stimulant which he forced between the lips of the stricken men.

Danzig was the first to recover his senses. He looked around him in sudden alarm. "What a shock!" he husked. "Felt as if a million volts passed through my body."

A moment later Gettering shuffled to

his feet. Bewildered for the first few seconds, he stared at the others.

"You were shocked with what looks like a nerve-ray gun," said Carruthers. "Feeling better?"

Gettering peered at the cold body of Zaryoti's spy on the floor, sighed and turned to the young scientist. "Have we still a chance?"

"I think so." Carruthers turned to his assistant. "Feel equal to returning to your controls, Karl?"

Danzig forced himself to his feet. "Sure." He lurched to his former position beside the strange motors.

For the first time since the spy had entered, Farnsworth spoke. "I think we're too late. The air fleet couldn't possibly——"

THERE came a sharp exclamation from Gettering's lips. He had picked up the electronic phone, heard its summons and switched it on. Into the quiet of the laboratory broke the voice of General Reilly.

"Commander of the Western air fleet calling Washington." Then speaking in the code: "Breaking orders believed to have been forged. Just passed over Wake Island. Midway Islands ahead and to port. Instructions requested."

The electronic phone sizzled as Gettering snapped his orders out into space. And there was a hopeful glint in his eyes when he had finished.

The electronic phone in Langham's hands buzzed its summons. He listened stonily to the report, grunted, and clicked the receiver to its hook.

"Head of the Meteorological Bureau," he stated. "He reports all compasses thrown off during the atomic bomb bombardment. At a loss to account for it. Thinks the release of atomic energy overcame the pull of the magnetic poles."

"Interesting," commented Carruthers, "but hardly important in view of the larger things happening. Our next move is to——"

"To locate Zaryoti," broke in Langham, "and destroy him."

Carruthers nodded. "It's our only chance."

Once more he faced the panel of the ether-vision machine. He shoved a foot switch and clicked two with his fingers. Then he slowly revolved the control dial.

"Watch out, Karl. I'm all ready."

Danzig nodded, and crouched above the strange motors.

The silver surface of the magnetic screen became cloudy as before. The same miniature whirlwind of flying dust particles whipped across its glittering surface. Slowly it brightened from gray to greenish-blue.

There was a moment of vast silence, then the hissing flow of waves, the beat of engines, and the pound of waters as they lashed the hull of a fast-moving ship.

Carruthers switched on the current generated by the strange motors. Into action went the infra-red tubes. The darkness shrouding a far-away battle-ship dissolved. For a tense second it seemed as though the steel prow pointing into the ether-vision was going to smash into the laboratory.

A twist on the directional antenna and the revealing ray slithered along the gleaming hull. It wasn't the flagship. Across miles of gentle rollers moved the ether-vision ray, searching in its mysterious way for the rest of the Asiatic fleet.

After a half-hour's search it came upon the main fleet, dim and brownish in the smoke screen. Ship after ship was examined. Battle-cruisers, destroyers, submarines—all were searched, but the headquarters of the wily Asiatic chieftain was not discovered.

Grimly Aaron Carruthers widened his search through space for the headquarters of the Asiatic master mind, Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti. Time moved inexorably onward. The hand of doom was closing down. Would they find him before it was too late?

Suddenly acting on a hunch, Carruthers widened his search and turned the ether-vision ray into cloud space above the United States. No trace of Zaryoti anywhere. He moved out over the Pacific again and picked up the Western air fleet under Reilly's command. It was moving shoreward in ten compact wings.

A thousand miles to the north the ray disclosed the wasp-like planes of the Asiatics, swimming in slow circles as if waiting for orders. Gettering's funereal voice broke the silence.

"Look!" he gasped. "They outnumber us more than two to one!"

Carruthers said nothing. As he watched the planes he saw them separating into distinct formations. They were about to move. But where? How was he to warn Reilly?

Langham seemed to read his thoughts. "Message interception. It's a long chance, and it might work."

The invisible ether-vision ray swept along the glistening bodies of the wasp-like planes and settled on a ship covered with streamers. Here was authority. The ray probed the inside of its cabin.

An operator with an inscrutable face was just handing a message to an officer wearing the uniform insignia of a commander. The commander studied the written words. Simultaneously, the ray moved closer to the paper.

It was Langham who translated. His knowledge of Asiatic languages, while rudimentary, was enough to grasp the significance of Zaryoti's message to his combined air fleet.

"The time has come to strike," wrote Langham so that the others might see. "The American fleet has been reached and ordered shoreward. Your orders are to destroy it. Use the sacrificial method. One life for each ship of the air. The plan can not fail."

As Langham scribbled his translation, Farnsworth, speaking over an electronic phone, was issuing counter-orders. "Zaryoti is planning to use the sacrificial method," he was telling the fleet commander. "Bring out the steel nets. Attack comes from above."

"Squadrons one and two," wrote Langham, "will converge upon the coast cities of the Pacific. The time has been moved up five hours. Strike and strike hard, using the atomic bombs."

The Air Secretary lost no time in contacting the fortified cities along the Pacific. "Ultimatum of ten hours has been abandoned," he warned each defense commander. "Zaryoti is preparing to strike at once."

Orders and counter-orders flashed the length and breadth of the United States. The ether-vision ray centered on the flagship of the Asiatic fleet. More orders were intercepted. It looked for a time as though this little band of men had solved Zaryoti's strategy.

But the military genius of the Asiatic war lord was not so easily thwarted. Zaryoti, sensing the Americans were intercepting his messages, switched to an involved cipher.

Langham pocketed his pencil. His face was white. Defeat stared him in the face. "Even with an expert cipher man working on these messages we couldn't hope to get them solved under days. It looks—it looks, gentlemen, as though we are a defeated nation."

Carruthers smiled wanly. "Gentlemen, I refuse to accept defeat. I'm going to

find Zaryoti. He's somewhere above. And having found him, I'll find a way to destroy him. Don't leave this room. I am going to need you when the time comes."

He returned to the panel of the ether-vision machine and began slowly to search sky space for the lair of the Asiatic war lord. But though he stuck to his task throughout the night, in the end he had to bow to defeat. Zaryoti's headquarters couldn't be found.

DAWN came up on the Atlantic coast. Then the Middle West. Then on the Pacific coast. Dawn and the red haze of the Armageddon in the disastrous year 2000. And with the coming of dawn came the first heart-breaking news of disaster. The entire Blue Fleet of the United States navy had been wiped out of existence.

San Diego had fallen. San Pedro had been entered and the inner harbor destroyed. For all time the long-range guns of Fort MacArthur had been silenced. And the huge bridge connecting San Francisco with the mainland had been reduced to ashes.

Slowly the yellow tide of invasion rolled eastward, leaving death and destruction in its wake. A protecting screen of fog hovered above the great air and war centers in the Middle West. Above, in the blue, waited the Atlantic air fleet, outnumbered doubly by the vast clouds of wasp-like planes of the Asiatics.

Worn and weary by the night-long vigil, Aaron Carruthers picked up scattered combats in the sky. His face was haggard. So were the faces of the other watchers as they saw their own countrymen going down to desperate defeat in flaming ships.

In desperation Carruthers tuned in on the Continental broadcast band of news. There was no late news, merely a review of what had taken place the night before. But one item claimed his attention, confirming Zaryoti's threat of the evening before to show his power to strike when and wherever he wished. None of the others had noticed what seemed an unimportant piece of news. Perhaps their thoughts were elsewhere, of things more immediate.

Carruthers spoke slowly as he tried to think his way along. "You gentlemen will remember," he began, "that Zaryoti warned us he was going to bomb Washington, Los Angeles and the great power projects of Niagara?"

They nodded, dully.

"Well," continued Carruthers, "Washington and Los Angeles got everything in the way of destruction that Zaryoti intended they should. But the great power projects of Niagara and the surrounding territory remained absolutely untouched. Instead, the city of Toronto, across Lake Ontario, was destroyed utterly by atomic bombs. The report has just been released."

Farnsworth scoffed at the news. "Who said they bombed Toronto? Zaryoti is too great a military genius to risk open conflict with Canada."

The others nodded in agreement. Zaryoti couldn't be that stupid.

"Nevertheless," Carruthers went on, "someone in his organization made a hideous blunder. There was fog over the region of the Great Lakes last night. And you recall the meteorologist's report of compasses being rendered useless owing to the release of atomic energy and their effect on the magnetic poles? Well, it's just possible that Toronto was destroyed, not because of Zaryoti's orders, but because the Asiatic bombers were thrown off their course in the fog, flew by compass, and picked up the north side of Lake Ontario instead of the south. At that time,

Washington was an inferno of atomic explosions."

"I get your point," agreed Langham, "but what effect it will have on Canada's parliamentary body can not be foretold."

Farnsworth shook his head gloomily. He was thinking of the Blue Fleet somewhere at the bottom of the Pacific.

Gettering broke the silence. "Try the Pacific again, will you? I want to see what is happening to the Western air fleet."

The ether-vision ray probed space once more. Into its luminous screen flowed a panorama of darting and falling planes above the battleships of two great nations.

As they watched the tremendous battle they became aware of something queer taking place before their eyes. The low, blackish ships of the Asiatic sea squadrons were being wiped out. Even as the watchers searched for the reason, they saw with their own eyes a sad spectacle of heroism.

American pilots of General Reilly's air fleet had borrowed a leaf from the book of the Asiatics. They were sacrificing their lives and planes with a devotion equal to that of the yellow men. They knew they could not hope to overcome the vast numbers wiping them from the air. To die meant nothing. But to die without destroying at least two enemy planes was not to be thought of.

They made their decision against the orders of their leader, General Reilly. And having made their decision, they hurled their winged steeds downward, took their air enemies in midstride, and when they knew their bullet-riddled planes would never fly again, hurled them against the decks of the battleships below.

The Pacific became a shambles. But still the yellow men fought on, taking their enormous toll of destruction. And when things looked blackest, a strange thing happened.

Out of the sky dropped a cloud of bright-winged planes. They came with the speed of rockets. Reinforcements for Zaryoti? The white-faced men in the laboratory didn't know. General Reilly's air fleet was half wiped out. If these were Zaryoti's ships of the air, then the war was over. Victory would go to the Asiatics.

Tensely the little band of men waited, their hearts hammering. They had done all they could. They had signaled every move made by Zaryoti. They had sent out exact reports of the positions of air and sea fleets. They could do no more. Zaryoti had played his ace card when he opened hostilities by setting his war machine into motion five hours before the time specified in his ultimatum.

A WASP-LIKE plane came sagging down through the air. A second and a third followed. Something was happening in the sky above.

"Up, up!" urged Gettering. "Get closer to those silver planes."

The ether-vision ray moved up. The silver planes grew larger. Then the watchers knew they were seeing, not silver planes, but armored airships. And painted on the wings were golden maple leaves.

Carruthers spoke huskily. "Canadians!"

There was a new sound coming from the ether-vision—a brittle thunder that drowned the roar of motors. The armored planes were boring into the Asiatic squadrons like oxygen flame into steel.

This was the Canadian way of avenging the destruction of Toronto. Unknown to the world she had made her decision and had joined the United States against the common enemy menacing her borders.

Slowly the tide of destruction began to run in the other direction. With the coming of the maple leaf planes, Zaryoti had met his match in numbers on the Pacific.

His next move, as everyone knew, would be to gather his scattered forces from America's interior.

Carruthers' eyes were bloodshot from staring into the luminous panel. The world was a seething mass of falling planes and exploding fortresses. Wherever he looked there was a hovering shadow of death.

He twisted the directional antenna slightly, and became aware of a lone ship wheeling in a circle above the Asiatic squadrons. He knew this ship. He knew that Zaryoti was not inside. He knew it to be a message center, and therefore in direct touch with Zaryoti himself. As he thought of these things, something clicked in his brain. And suddenly he had solved the problem of how to find the master brain of all this carnage.

"I've got it," he called to the others. "Zaryoti is doomed. Look! This enemy plane circling all by itself. See that steel mast? There is a short antenna fastened to it. The whole thing revolves as the plane circles so that it is always horizontal to a fixed spot out in space."

"A single beam unicycle type?" breathed Langham.

"Exactly. Now, see, we're going inside its cabin and take a reading of the dial at which it is set."

The interior of the cabin flowed across the panel. Carruthers scanned the dial and set down the following figures: 817.04. These figures he checked against the reading of his own dials.

"We'll check these from another point," he went on. "The flagship down below."

He shifted the beam to the wave-crested Pacific and searched for the flagship. After some moments he found it. The powerful beam of the ether-vision moved through its steel hull to the radio cabin. Again Carruthers made a note of the figures: 891.9. He also checked these figures against those of his own dial.

"Now," he continued, "I won't need their figures. I've transposed them to my own numerals of the ether-vision dial."

With a compass he drew a circle the size of the figured dial before him; then he marked in the points coinciding with the figure readings, halved the distance, and with a ruler, held to the exact center of the circle and touching the point midway of the two readings, he drew a straight line.

"There," he finished. "Somewhere on this line we'll find Zaryoti." He placed the drawing against a plotted map of the United States, checked the angles of the two panel readings and smiled knowingly. "The line runs shoreward to San Francisco, continues northeastward through Omaha, Akron and New York. We'll begin at this end and trace it westward."

He turned to Gettering. "Contact General Reilly as well as the commander of the Canadian ships. Have planes made ready to leave at a second's notice to a spot I'll designate."

The silence that followed was broken only by the hum of motors as the ether-vision ray moved southwestward along the invisible line Carruthers was following.

MILE after mile flowed into the luminous panel, every one of them empty. Westward moved the beam, searching, searching, searching. Slow minutes dragged on to an eternity of time. Carruthers' eyes ached from the strain. His shoulders slumped, but his sensitive fingers never for a single moment faltered on the dials.

And suddenly, out of the mist above San Francisco, appeared a giant plane, one that the watchers had never seen before. Carruthers checked its position.

The ether-vision beam brought it closer. Its outer walls disappeared. The interior became visible, and then the stiff, military figure of the Marshal himself.

Except for his radio operators, he was alone, staring with cruel slanting eyes at a report one of his operators had handed him. Whatever he thought, whatever he felt was hidden beneath a yellow, serene face.

Carruthers turned to the Air Secretary. "All right, Gettering. Get in touch with the air fleets. Half a dozen planes ought to be enough. Location, approximately ten miles above San Francisco. Hurry!"

But Gettering was already talking into the electronic phone. "In the name of humanity, General Reilly, I command you to destroy Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti. I've given you the location of his plane. Act at once in conjunction with the Canadian air commander."

Carruthers turned momentarily to the battle out on the Pacific. Reilly had gathered his fleet into a compact wedge and had driven it into the inferno of Asiatic sky fighters. The Canadian armored planes were close behind. Like a destroying cloud, their combined strength swarmed over the battle-ships below. The Asiatic sea fleet had already started away under cover of a smoke screen.

They were helpless against the attack. Gun crews were driven from their stations. Masts were shattered. Antenna wires were destroyed. The retreat was turning into a rout.

The message centers of the scattered Asiatics turned to the high command for orders. They were helpless. They needed leadership. Otherwise their fleets on sea and in the air would be destroyed. Frantically they signaled their leader for orders that would bring an end to the chaos engulfing them.

But the orders never came, and chaos engulfed them.

The ether-vision beam had focused once more on Zaryoti's giant cabin plane. The Asiatic war lord was leering contemptuously at the war-torn world below him.

Did these misguided fools of the United States think their opposition would hold back his highly efficient machines of air and sea? Did they for a moment think they could defy the greatest war lord in the world?

His face was no longer serene. A shrill laugh crackled from his lips. He half turned around to snap out an order to one of his operators when the laugh froze on his lips.

A brittle staccato drummed against his ears. The giant plane trembled as if shaken by a mighty wind. Two of the operators slumped against the dials of their machines.

The startled leader of the Asiatics moved snakily across the cabin and peered through the quartz portholes into space. His eyes, black as obsidian, became flecked with dangerous lights. The saffron hue of his skin changed to a dirty gray. His lips worked soundlessly.

Realization smote him like a blow between the eyes. It hadn't seemed important at the time, but now he saw it all too clearly. He remembered the report. A squadron of his bombers had become lost in the fog owing to a compass deflection. Against his orders they had destroyed Toronto. A little mistake in itself, but Zaryoti had hoped to smash his way to victory before Canada could act.

As he looked through the portholes he knew that the shadow of death was upon him. His secret place in the sky had been ferreted out. Three swift American planes were circling the giant cabin plane. There

were also three armored planes blazoned with the gold maple leaf of Canada flying beside them. Their concealed machine-guns were chattering savagely.

Pellets of explosive metal were erupting about his head, his arms, his feet. The last of his operators had crumpled over his dials, his head rocking grotesquely with the roll of the plane.

And then Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti thought and saw no more. The exploding pellets reached his body. Stinging pains lanced his heart. He died standing up, a sneer of contempt on his lips, his face working crookedly.

But as he fell, his arm reached out and closed around a switch in a death grip. The weight of his falling body threw the breaker points together, completing the circuit. There came a blinding burst of red flame, and before the amazed eyes of the watchers, the giant cabin plane of the Asiatic war lord, and the six destroying planes surrounding it, vanished from sight. Nothing remained but a cloud of white powder that sifted down like snow into the waters of the Golden Gate.

The white civilization of America had again survived the menace of a combined Asiatic attack. When would the next come? No one in Aaron Carruthers' laboratory knew. They knew only that their country had been saved at the last moment. They knew that victory had come at the darkest hour, and that Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti had passed into oblivion. Beyond that they dared not think.

Under the Tomb

By ROBERT NELSON

Dread beings grope and sport in gory lakes,
A foul mist creeps and feeds on swollen slugs;
From beds of perfumed plants squirm fetid snakes,
And like a flower grown from sable drugs,
A moon of steel drips blood upon a sky
Darkened by what mad phantoms prophesy.

But this hath ceased and passed, and now in that
Mephitic, crumbling woodland 'neath the tomb
The dead sup with the dead o'er flowing vat,
And searing candles cleanse the rotting gloom;
And they who stood in sorrow's joy and pain,
Tread now through hell's ecstatical refrain.

Far still beneath, where bloated babes are kept
In glacial rooms, and skulls are lit as lamps
To guide through life beyond, and where are swept
Green veils of oozing slime and deadly damps,
There is an everlasting resonance
Pealed by the tomb in glad deliverance.

The Bronze Casket

By RICHARD H. HART

A strange tale of the Wandering Jew, and the weird experience of an American art student who was stranded in Paris

GILBERT NYSMITH strove desperately to free himself from the embraces of a nightmare. Out late with fellow-students the night before, he had looked once too often upon the *vin rouge;* his senses seemed drugged. His mind struggled convulsively until, suddenly, it won back across the borderline to consciousness. Someone was knocking upon the door of his room.

Suppressing a groan, he tore his heavy lids apart and forced himself to rise. He stepped into his trousers and went to the door.

It was the *concierge* with a letter. Gilbert took it, managed to squeeze out a word of thanks, and closed the door. Standing in the middle of the room, he tore open the envelope and drew out the message. It read:

Mr. Gilbert Nysmith,
18-Bis Rue Agneau Sacré,
Paris (Seine), France.

Dear Sir:

As you doubtless know, your uncle, Obediah Nysmith, died on March 30th, last. It now develops that your uncle left a will in which your name was not mentioned. As a consequence, we are compelled to discontinue the allowance heretofore made you for the purpose of prosecuting your studies in Paris.

Unfortunately, the intelligence of your uncle's demise did not reach us in time to forestall the mailing of your remittance of April 1st, which it now develops was without authority. Will you kindly let us have check to reimburse us for this unauthorized payment at your earliest convenience?

Yours very truly,
GUARDIAN TRUST COMPANY
By J. P. Cullinan, Secy.

The scowl with which he read the opening paragraph of the letter changed to a sardonic grin as Gilbert came to the concluding sentence. His check, indeed! He ran a hand into his pocket and produced its total contents: three half-franc pieces.

He had known for two weeks of his uncle's death, and had even in some degree expected his studies to terminate on that account. But to find himself suddenly cut off, "without a shilling," in a foreign country, was something he was not in the least prepared for.

Mentally he enumerated the coins that were his sole wealth: breakfast, luncheon, dinner. There was today taken care of, but how about tomorrow? He got up from the bed and began to pace the floor of the room in perplexity. With his uncle, his last blood tie had been dissolved, and as for friends—well, he had always been too busy, somehow, to cultivate friendship. He had acquaintances in plenty, yet no intimates. But—wait a minute. How about Bob Andrews? He had done a great deal for Bob—there was the matter of that thesis, for one thing—and Andrews had always sworn eternal gratitude. Here was a chance to put that often-avowed gratitude to the test.

GILBERT completed his toilet, and went down the three flights of stairs to the street. Entering a little restaurant next door, he exchanged one of the half-franc pieces for *croissants* and coffee. He hurriedly downed the slight breakfast, then set out on foot for the lodgings of his friend Andrews in the Rue Bonaparte.

"A cloud of golden bubbles streamed from the little box."

It was only when he had interviewed the old *concierge* at Andrews' *pension* that Gilbert realized the true depth of his calamity. His friend had left the week before for Nice, and would not return until the end of summer. And this was early May!

He had walked three blocks in a semi-daze when he realized that he had not even asked for his friend's new address. He hurried back to the *pension* in the Rue Bonaparte, only to find that the *concierge* had gone out, leaving no word as to when he would return. Mechanically, he turned and walked away.

Alone in Paris, and dead-broke! It was a predicament to wring tears from any but a hardened soldier of fortune. Those casual acquaintances of his—why hadn't he cultivated them more? As things stood, he could borrow a couple of francs from one, five from another, and perhaps ten from a third. Such borrowings could do him no real good; they would enable him to live precariously for a week or so, and at the end of that time he would find

himself in worse condition than ever: friendless, penniless, and thousands of miles from home.

Sauntering dejectedly along through the bright Paris sunlight, which seemed now to have taken on a queer, morbid tint, Gilbert chanced to pass a café near the intersection of the street with the Boulevard Saint Germain. As he absently threaded his way among the tables set upon the sidewalk, he suddenly found himself tripped and thrown to hands and knees. Brought abruptly to his senses, he rose and whirled about, uncertain whether to offer or to demand an apology.

The only person near him was a well-dressed, handsome man who seemed past the middle age and was decidedly foreign in appearance. He was just draining a cup of fragrant *café-cognac*. As Gilbert glared at him, he set down his cup and smiled.

"Do not apologize, I beg of you, *Monsieur,*" he said with an indefinable trace of accent. "I have not been discommoded in the least."

Saying which, he extended his hand, and, half abashed, Gilbert put out his own. Instead of clasping it, as Gilbert had expected, he laid in his outstretched palm two pieces of paper, the uppermost of which was a twenty-franc note on the Bank of France.

"You will not mind performing a little errand for me, I am sure," he said rapidly but smoothly. "Have the goodness to take that pawn-ticket to the shop which issued it and redeem the pledge which it calls for: a little, empty casket. I shall expect you tomorrow at this hour, at number 18-Bis, Rue Agneau Sacré, room fourteen."

"But," remonstrated Gilbert, "that's my own room!"

"I know it," said the other, and winked deliberately. Then he rose from his table, turned about, and walked rapidly away.

Gilbert stared after him, of two minds whether to run him down and decline the errand. Did the stranger take him for a gutter-snipe? But, on second thought, he paused. After all, he had plenty of time —his studies at the university were certainly ended—and he was badly in need of a friend. Too, the stranger seemed to know him; knew his address, at any rate. There could surely be no harm in accommodating him in such a simple matter as he had named.

His resolution thus taken, Gilbert examined the pawn-ticket curiously. A close scrutiny revealed that it had been issued only three days earlier to some person whose name he was unable to decipher, by a shop in the Rue des Archives. The amount of the loan was ten francs, and the pledge described as "one metal box."

Why the stranger did not himself redeem the pledge, Gilbert could not imagine. Of course, it might be stolen property, but in view of the other facts in the matter this seemed very unlikely. There was something decidedly queer about the whole transaction, but, strangely enough, now that he was embarked in it he felt no wish to withdraw. On the contrary, he set off toward the Rue des Archives as fast as his feet would carry him. Crossing the Seine by the Pont au Change, he turned to the right and followed the Rue de Rivoli to the Hotel de Ville. A left turn and a half-minute more of walking brought him to the pawn-shop.

THE shop was very old and dingy, and without show-windows of any kind. As he let himself in, a little bell on the door tinkled dispiritedly, but he found no one inside. He waited for several minutes in the semi-darkness, and was just about to raise his voice in a halloo when a door

opened at the rear and an old Auvergnat in velveteen trousers and carpet-slippers shuffled in.

He looked at Gilbert sharply when he presented the ticket, but all he said was: "Fifteen francs."

Gilbert produced the twenty-franc note, and after taking it and rattling it suspiciously, and even smelling it, the Auvergnat went to a safe in the corner of the shop and brought back a five-franc note and a small metal casket, no larger than his two thumbs.

"Wasn't there a key for it?" asked Gilbert.

The pawn-broker's expression did not change by a hair.

"Non, Monsieur," he said.

His tone did not invite argument, and Gilbert pocketed the casket, together with the five francs change, and left the shop.

When he had turned the corner of the Rue de Rivoli, curiosity impelled him to draw out the casket and examine it. It proved to be of bronze, almost black with age, and apparently of exceedingly antique design. On its top was an inscription in queer characters that to Gilbert's inexperienced eye seemed a cross between Hebrew and Arabic. He shook the box, but heard nothing to indicate its contents. Then he remembered that the stranger had said that it was empty, and returned it to his pocket.

It was now nearly noon, and being almost penniless he naturally discovered that he was ravenously hungry. Nothing short of a whole loaf of bread, he thought, would stay his hunger. He accordingly turned down a side street and made for the nearest bakery.

He selected a large, appetizingly fresh loaf, and exchanged for it one of his precious half-franc pieces. Then he left the bakery and hurried to his lodgings in the Rue Agneau Sacré.

The sight of his room recalled to mind the discouraging letter he had received, which in turn brought a train of reflections that led him, one by one, over the events of the morning, and finally to the bronze casket in his pocket. The queer inscription on the box provoked his curiosity afresh, and it suddenly occurred to him to copy it off and try to get it deciphered at the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Forgetting the importunity of his hunger for the moment, he set down his loaf, then drew the little casket from one pocket while he fumbled for a pencil in another. In his preoccupation, the box slipped from his fingers and crashed to the floor.

Whether it was his imagination, a passing cloud, or whatever, the room seemed to darken for a moment. The lid of the casket flew open from its impact with the bare floor, and Gilbert's ejaculation of dismay was cut short by the apparition of a cloud of golden bubbles which streamed from the little box.

The golden cloud expanded, then contracted and took on a vague resemblance to human shape. At the same instant, Gilbert seemed to hear a deep voice speaking in a tongue utterly strange to him. Then the voice ceased, and the bubbles vanished into the air like steam on a warm day.

Although the room was again as bright as ever, Gilbert stood for a full minute with dropped jaw while a prickling of awe coursed and recoursed along his spine. But, gradually, his self-possession returned, and he was soon able to assure himself that the whole incident was a figment of an over-stimulated imagination.

He bent over to pick up the little box, and received another shock. On the floor, beside the casket, lay a ring.

His first thought, naturally, was that the ring had come out of the box. Then he remembered that the stranger had said that it was empty, and that he had unsuccessfully attempted to discover any contents by shaking it.

But there was no doubting his eyes: the ring was there. He collected his wits by an effort of will-power, and picked up the ring and casket. Both seemed warm to his touch, as if they had just been exposed to considerable heat.

The casket was unlined, and he reflected that, if the ring had been in it, most certainly it should have rattled when he shook it. He closed the lid, and was startled to find that it refused to open again; that it was, in fact, as tightly locked as when he had received it from the old Auvergnat.

This circumstance caused him perforce to abandon his half-formed intention of putting the ring in the box and saying nothing about it to the stranger when the time came to deliver the casket; it was out of the question, of course, to tempt Providence by dropping it again with the hope of reopening it.

After all, he asked himself, had the ring really been in the box? It seemed logical to think that it had, yet equally logical to believe that it had not. In the hope of settling the question, he gave his attention to an examination of the ring itself.

It was of antique yellow gold, chased all around in the swastika pattern, but its most striking feature was the setting: a fire-opal cut in the form of a T-shaped cross with a ring at the top. On the cross were inscribed characters different from, but bearing a slight resemblance to, those on the casket. They seemed to form two words, one vertical and the other horizontal.

Something impelled Gilbert to slip the bit of jewelry upon the middle finger of his left hand, and to his surprize he found that it fitted perfectly. He stretched out his arm for a better perspective. The ring was an admirable piece of workmanship, ancient though it might be, and he fancied that it looked especially well on his finger. It somehow made him feel rich and powerful to see it there, and he enjoyed the sensation so much that he let it remain while he attacked the loaf of bread he had bought for his luncheon.

THE bread was really excellent, and needed only a little wine to make a satisfying meal. "Too bad," he said to himself, "that I was so prodigal with that Château Rouge I had last week. I wish I'd saved a bottle for time-o'-need."

At that moment a golden bubble seemed to rise from the table before him, and he followed it with his eyes. It sailed leisurely across the room and vanished in a corner. At the point where it disappeared was a wine-bottle which he certainly did not remember having put there. He crossed the room and picked it up. It was full and tightly corked, and bore the well-known Château Rouge trade-mark.

It was very strange. There was no plausible explanation of the bottle's being there. "Still," he reflected, "I *thought* my supply had vanished a little too quickly. I must have set this bottle in the corner when I was straightening things around, without remembering having done so."

He was too hungry to bother long with what seemed only a petty mystery, and soon had the bottle open, washing down his bread with its zestful contents.

The wine was potent, and his stomach otherwise none too full. He felt lifted up, exhilarated.

"I wish," he said to himself, "that I had a hundred francs or so. I feel just like picking a winner at Auteuil."

He had barely uttered the words when there came a knock at his door. He opened it and found an acquaintance named Brenner in the hallway.

"That miserable cadge," he thought to himself; "I wonder what he wants now!" Then he smiled, for he was beyond the reach of the most practised borrower.

"Hello, Nysmith," greeted Brenner; "how are you today?"

Gilbert replied that he was in low spirits.

"Maybe this will cheer you up," returned Brenner. "I've just had a remittance from my lawyer; he sold some property for me. Here are the two hundred francs I owe you. I'm in a big hurry, or I'd stop and chat a bit."

Almost stunned, Gilbert took the money. He was barely able to murmur his thanks. Then Brenner turned and vanished down the stairs.

Gilbert closed the door and sat down to think. It was hard to convince himself that the wine had not affected his brain—was not causing hallucinations. But the bank-notes were convincingly real. Suddenly he recollected his recent declaration about going out and betting on the races. The idea now appeared foolish, but he might as well admit that he had an unreasonable prejudice against changing his mind; most gamblers have the same superstition. Luck should be pressed.

"If I only knew what horse to bet on!" he muttered, closing his eyes the better to concentrate his thoughts. As he did so, he seemed to see against his eyelids a number of the golden bubbles which were becoming so familiar. They darted back and forth as he watched, then suddenly grouped themselves to form the number "21".

"Vingt-et-un," he repeated to himself. "That is the name of a horse which is to run in the second race at Auteuil, today. I remember noticing it in yesterday's *Revue Sportive.* Looks as if I'm being dared to make a bet."

It may have been the ring on his finger which influenced his decision, for every time his gaze fell on it he had a return of the sensation of being rich and powerful. At any rate, he dressed himself carefully, then went downstairs and took the Metro to Auteuil.

Only a few moments remained for making bets on the second race when he arrived and paid twenty francs for admission. He wagered a hundred francs on *Vingt-et-un* to win, and turned to go to the stands. As he pushed through the crowd, he heard one man say to another:

"Vingt-et-un will win, certainly."

Swayed by an impulse, Gilbert turned back and placed his remaining eighty francs on the horse he had scarcely heard of the day before. Too late, he reflected that if he lost he would either have to walk back from Auteuil or go empty to bed.

"What are the odds on *Vingt-et-un?*" he asked.

"Forty to one," was the reply.

Gilbert was horror-struck. Somehow or other he had gained the impression that he was betting on the favorite. And now he learned that he had put his entire fortune on an unknown—a forty-to-one shot! Sick with disgust at himself, he made his way to the stands.

It was a close race. Surprizingly, *Vingt-et-un* ran *Prince Hebert,* the favorite, a close second. But the favorite was first under the wire by a nose.

Gilbert's interest in the races was completely killed. Cursing himself for a brainless fool, he arose, left his place in the stands, and made for the nearest exit. He was within a few feet of it when he heard a babel of shouts. Turning about, he distinguished the words:

"*Prince Hebert* is disqualified!"

Gilbert felt the earth rock. If the favorite was disqualified, then the race belonged to *Vingt-et-un!*

Dazedly, he forced his way to the betting-booth where he had made his wager and displayed his tickets. The bookmaker's clerk grumbled and swore under his breath, but counted out his winnings and shoved them under the wicket. Although his senses almost refused to credit the fact, Gilbert had suddenly become possessed of more than seven thousand francs.

WALKING in a golden haze, one forearm pressed tightly against the breast-pocket which contained his winnings, he left the race-track. Through force of habit, he made his way to the entrance of the Metro station, but fear of pickpockets in the subway brought a moment of lucidity, and he flagged a taxicab instead.

"Place de l'Opéra," he directed the chauffeur.

With seven thousand francs, he reflected, he might remain in Paris and continue to prosecute his studies for many months, or even for a year or so. But the feeling of having been snatched from the brink of an abyss was too strong. His one overpowering impulse was to flee. From the Place de l'Opéra, he went on foot to the office of a steamship company in the Rue de la Paix, where by good luck he found there was a boat sailing from Le Havre for New York on the following night. He would have just sufficient time to hand over the casket to the polite stranger at the appointed hour, then to catch the boat-train to Le Havre.

That evening, with his steamer ticket and traveler's-checks for several hundred dollars stowed safely in his pocket, Gilbert made an attempt to celebrate his good fortune. He ordered and ate an excellent dinner at his favorite restaurant in Montmartre, and afterward attended the Comédie Française. But the dinner sat heavily upon his stomach, and the play seemed dull and stupid, so that he could scarcely sit through it. Something weighed upon his spirits: something which seemed either a feeling of guilt or a foreboding of disaster, although he could assign no reason for either. When the play had ended, he went at once to his room.

Sleep seemed a thing remote. He sat down upon the edge of his bed without undressing, and began to review the events of the day. There was something weird, something uncanny, in so much good luck. Perhaps that explained his feeling of unease. It had all happened, he remembered, after his encounter with the stranger at the café.

His eyes fell upon the antique ring upon his finger, and it suddenly occurred to him that the jewel had in some way influenced his fortune. All tommyrot, of course, he told himself. Still, it had been upon his finger when he had wished for the money which had been almost miraculously provided him, and when he had wished to know the name of the winner at Auteuil, so providentially supplied by his queer "hunch." Although feeling slightly foolish, he determined to make a test.

He drew a twenty-franc note from his pocket, looked at the ring, and said distinctly:

"I wish this twenty francs would become a thousand."

Nothing happened. He saw no golden bubbles. The twenty-franc note was still a twenty-franc note. Grinning sheepishly, and convinced that there could have been nothing supernatural in the day's events,

he pulled off the ring and put it, together with the bank-note, in his pocket, then went to bed.

GILBERT'S trunk had gone to the Montparnasse station, the next morning, and he was ready to follow it, when the stranger rapped on the door of his room.

"Good morning," he said, when Gilbert had opened to him. "I hope you have a pleasant voyage."

"Thank — you — *Monsieur,*" Gilbert stammered, his almost-forgotten forebodings of the night before returning with a rush. "How—how did you know I was going away?"

"I know many things," said the stranger, with an odd smile. "You had no trouble in obtaining the casket?"

"None," answered Gilbert. "Here it is. The pawnbroker said there was no key."

"He was right. There has never been a key to this casket."

"No key! Then, how does one open it?"

"That is a secret which I discovered many—that is to say, some time ago. Thank you very much for your kind offices. You may keep the five francs change, if it will be of any service."

"Thanks," returned Gilbert with a smile, "but I don't need it. Here it is."

The stranger returned the smile, rather wryly, but pocketed the bank-note. Then, after thanking Gilbert again, he departed.

It was only after he was on the boat-train that Gilbert remembered that neither of them had mentioned the ring.

He reached Le Havre without incident and boarded his steamer, finding that he was to share a stateroom with a college professor just returning from several years of research in the Levant. His cabin-mate had not yet appeared, and Gilbert was just washing away the traces of his journey on the train when a steward rapped on the door. The steward handed him a card and informed him that a gentleman wished to see him in the smoking-salon. Wondering who his visitor could be (for the card gave him no light), Gilbert hastily completed his toilet and made his way to the appointed salon. There, pacing nervously up and down, was the stranger who had employed him to redeem the bronze casket.

"So sorry to disturb you, Mr. Nysmith," he began with a polite but evidently forced smile, "but I must ask you a few questions, at once. You don't mind?"

"Not at all," said Gilbert. "Anything you like."

"Then, if you please, be good enough to relate just how you passed the remainder of yesterday, after redeeming my casket—with especial reference to the casket itself."

Gilbert gave a fairly complete outline of his program, beginning with his purchase of the loaf of bread, mentioning his finding of the ring, and ending with his visit to the theater. Of his half-skeptical test of the ring with the twenty-franc note, he could not force himself to speak.

The stranger shook his head sadly.

"My mistake," he said. "I should have been more frank. I should not have told you that the box was empty. The ring which it contained, my young friend, belonged to Shelomoh—that is to say, Solomon—and is the most powerful talisman which the world has yet seen. The words which you may have noticed engraved upon it are the *Schem hammphorasch,* the Incommunicable Name, which it happens I am the only man now living able to decipher.

"The golden bubbles of which you speak were the manifestations of a djinn, the slave of the ring. Once in every thou-

sand years he is forced to perform three tasks for the wearer of it. You wished yesterday for three things, and the djinn gave them to you. The second of these wishes was for money, the third to know the name of the winning horse at Auteuil; both are understandable. But the first wish—think of it!—was for a trifling bottle of wine which might have been purchased anywhere for a few francs! On the other hand, my first and only wish would have been to fall asleep and remain so until a curse under which I labor should have been lifted."

The stranger's demeanor was so sad, so hopeless, that, although fully convinced that his visitor was crazed, Gilbert could not help sympathizing with him.

"This curse," he asked, "is it some painful disease?"

"You might call it that," returned the stranger, gravely. "In fact, one of your American poets has called it a fever."

"That's bad," said Gilbert. "But, you spoke of sleeping until the curse had been lifted. Couldn't the—the djinn have lifted the curse?"

The stranger shook his head again, more sadly than ever.

"No," he said. "It was pronounced by One far more powerful than he—as I learned to my cost."

"I'm sorry," said Gilbert. "At least, you will allow me to return the ring."

"I will take it, yes," replied his visitor, apathetically, "although it will be useless for another thousand years. And to think that I followed the last holder for fifty years, across three continents, only to become possessed of it too late! However, what is to be, will be. I must go, now. Thank you, *Monsieur,* and good-bye."

"But," objected Gilbert, "you can't go, now. We're almost out of sight of land, and the pilot has already been dropped."

"It makes no difference, unfortunately," returned the other, leaving the salon and walking to the starboard rail.

"Wait!" cried Gilbert. "You'll be drowned!"

The stranger turned for a moment and smiled sadly.

"No such good fortune," he muttered, and leaped over the rail into the sea.

Gilbert started to shout: "Man overboard," but something seemed to restrain him. Although the stranger was apparently making no effort to swim, he was not sinking. Gilbert watched his head bobbing up and down in the steamer's wake until it disappeared in the gathering twilight.

Thoughtfully, he went below, where he encountered his cabin-mate. The professor was a quiet man with grave, inscrutable eyes and a curly Assyrian beard. When they had become somewhat acquainted, Gilbert unburdened his mind of the disconcerting happenings of the past thirty-six hours. The other listened attentively, and to Gilbert's surprize did not seem at all incredulous or inclined to scoff.

"What was the stranger's name?" he asked, at last.

"I don't remember," said Gilbert. "But, hold on. Here's his card: 'I. Lak'dion.' Ever hear of him?"

"Yes—and I think you have, too," returned the professor, softly. "You remember a certain heavily laden procession which made its way toward Golgotha, nearly two thousand years ago? And that, when a bystander adjured One of the Condemned to make haste, the Crossbearer replied: 'I go—but stay thou until I return'? The name of that rash bystander was Isaac Lak'dion—the *Wandering Jew.*"

"A hut wall buckled under the ram-like impact."

Beyond the Black River

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A thrilling novelette of the Picts and the wizard Zogar Sag—a startling weird saga of terrific adventures and dark magic

1. Conan Loses His Ax

THE stillness of the forest trail was so primeval that the tread of a soft-booted foot was a startling disturbance. At least it seemed so to the ears of the wayfarer, though he was moving along the path with the caution that must be practised by any man who ventures beyond Thunder River. He was a young man of medium height, with an

open countenance and a mop of tousled tawny hair unconfined by cap or helmet. His garb was common enough for that country—a coarse tunic, belted at the waist, short leather breeches beneath, and soft buckskin boots that came short of the knee. A knife-hilt jutted from one boot-top. The broad leather belt supported a short, heavy sword and a buckskin pouch. There was no perturbation in the wide eyes that scanned the green walls which fringed the trail. Though not tall, he was well built, and the arms that the short wide sleeves of the tunic left bare were thick with corded muscle.

He tramped imperturbably along, although the last settler's cabin lay miles behind him, and each step was carrying him nearer the grim peril that hung like a brooding shadow over the ancient forest.

He was not making as much noise as it seemed to him, though he well knew that the faint tread of his booted feet would be like a tocsin of alarm to the fierce ears that might be lurking in the treacherous green fastness. His careless attitude was not genuine; his eyes and ears were keenly alert, especially his ears, for no gaze could penetrate the leafy tangle for more than a few feet in either direction.

But it was instinct more than any warning by the external senses which brought him up suddenly, his hand on his hilt. He stood stock-still in the middle of the trail, unconsciously holding his breath, wondering what he had heard, and wondering if indeed he had heard anything. The silence seemed absolute. Not a squirrel chattered or bird chirped. Then his gaze fixed itself on a mass of bushes beside the trail a few yards ahead of him. There was no breeze, yet he had seen a branch quiver. The short hairs on his scalp prickled, and he stood for an instant undecided, certain that a move in either direction would bring death streaking at him from the bushes.

A heavy chopping crunch sounded behind the leaves. The bushes were shaken violently, and simultaneously with the sound, an arrow arched erratically from among them and vanished among the trees along the trail. The wayfarer glimpsed its flight as he sprang frantically to cover.

Crouching behind a thick stem, his sword quivering in his fingers, he saw the bushes part, and a tall figure stepped leisurely into the trail. The traveller stared in surprize. The stranger was clad like himself in regard to boots and breeks, though the latter were of silk instead of leather. But he wore a sleeveless hauberk of dark mesh-mail in place of a tunic, and a helmet perched on his black mane. That helmet held the other's gaze; it was without a crest, but adorned by short bull's horns. No civilized hand ever forged that head-piece. Nor was the face below it that of a civilized man: dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes, it was a face as untamed as the primordial forest which formed its background. The man held a broadsword in his right hand, and the edge was smeared with crimson.

"Come on out," he called, in an accent unfamiliar to the wayfarer. "All's safe now. There was only one of the dogs. Come on out."

The other emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on the proportions of the forest man—the massive iron-clad breast, and the arm that bore the reddened sword, burned dark by the sun and ridged and corded with muscles. He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even of that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers.

TURNING, he stepped back to the bushes and pulled them apart. Still not certain just what had happened, the wayfarer from the east advanced and stared down into the bushes. A man lay there, a short, dark, thickly-muscled man, naked except for a loin-cloth, a necklace of human teeth and a brass armlet. A short sword was thrust into the girdle of the loin-cloth, and one hand still gripped a heavy black bow. The man had long black hair; that was about all the wayfarer could tell about his head, for his features were a mask of blood and brains. His skull had been split to the teeth.

"A Pict, by the gods!" exclaimed the wayfarer.

The burning blue eyes turned upon him.

"Are you surprized?"

"Why, they told me at Velitrium, and again at the settlers' cabins along the road, that these devils sometimes sneaked across the border, but I didn't expect to meet one this far in the interior."

"You're only four miles east of Black River," the stranger informed him. "They've been shot within a mile of Velitrium. No settler between Thunder River and Fort Tuscelan is really safe. I picked up this dog's trail three miles south of the fort this morning, and I've been following him ever since. I came up behind him just as he was drawing an arrow on you. Another instant and there'd have been a stranger in Hell. But I spoiled his aim for him."

The wayfarer was staring wide-eyed at the larger man, dumfounded by the realization that the man had actually tracked down one of the forest-devils and slain him unsuspected. That implied woodsmanship of a quality undreamed, even for Conajohara.

"You are one of the fort's garrison?" he asked.

"I'm no soldier. I draw the pay and rations of an officer of the line, but I do my work in the woods. Valannus knows I'm of more use ranging along the river than cooped up in the fort."

Casually the slayer shoved the body deeper into the thickets with his foot, pulled the bushes together and turned away down the trail. The other followed him.

"My name is Balthus," he offered. "I was at Velitrium last night. I haven't decided whether I'll take up a hide of land, or enter fort-service."

"The best land near Thunder River is already taken," grunted the slayer. "Plenty of good land between Scalp Creek—you crossed it a few miles back—and the fort, but that's getting too devilish close to the river. The Picts steal over to burn and murder—as that one did. They don't always come singly. Some day they'll try to sweep the settlers out of Conajohara. And they may succeed—probably will succeed. This colonization business is mad, anyway. There's plenty of good land east of the Bossonian marches. If the Aquilonians would cut up some of the big estates of their barons, and plant wheat where now only deer are hunted, they wouldn't have to cross the border and take the land of the Picts away from them."

"That's queer talk from a man in the service of the Governor of Conajohara," objected Balthus.

"It's nothing to me," the other retorted. "I'm a mercenary. I sell my sword to the highest bidder. I never planted wheat and never will, so long as there are other harvests to be reaped with the sword. But you Hyborians have expanded as far as you'll be allowed to expand. You've crossed the marches, burned a few villages, exterminated a few clans and pushed back the frontier to Black River; but I doubt if you'll even be able to hold what you've conquered, and you'll never

push the frontier any further westward. Your idiotic king doesn't understand conditions here. He won't send you enough reinforcements, and there are not enough settlers to withstand the shock of a concerted attack from across the river."

"But the Picts are divided into small clans," persisted Balthus. "They'll never unite. We can whip any single clan."

"Or any three or four clans," admitted the slayer. "But some day a man will rise and unite thirty or forty clans, just as was done among the Cimmerians, when the Gundermen tried to push the border northward, years ago. They tried to colonize the southern marches of Cimmeria: destroyed a few small clans, built a fort-town, Venarium—you've heard the tale."

"So I have indeed," replied Balthus, wincing. The memory of that red disaster was a black blot in the chronicles of a proud and war-like people. "My uncle was at Venarium when the Cimmerians swarmed over the walls. He was one of the few who escaped that slaughter. I've heard him tell the tale, many a time. The barbarians swept out of the hills in a ravening horde, without warning, and stormed Venarium with such fury none could stand before them. Men, women and children were butchered. Venarium was reduced to a mass of charred ruins, as it is to this day. The Aquilonians were driven back across the marches, and have never since tried to colonize the Cimmerian country. But you speak of Venarium familiarly. Perhaps you were there?"

"I was," grunted the other. "I was one of the horde that swarmed over the walls. I hadn't yet seen fifteen snows, but already my name was repeated about the council fires."

Balthus involuntarily recoiled, staring. It seemed incredible that the man walking tranquilly at his side should have been one of those screeching, blood-mad devils that had poured over the walls of Venarium on that long-gone day to make her streets run crimson.

"Then you, too, are a barbarian!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

The other nodded, without taking offense.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"I've heard of you." Fresh interest quickened Balthus' gaze. No wonder the Pict had fallen victim to his own sort of subtlety. The Cimmerians were barbarians as ferocious as the Picts, and much more intelligent. Evidently Conan had spent much time among civilized men, though that contact had obviously not softened him, nor weakened any of his primitive instincts. Balthus' apprehension turned to admiration as he marked the easy catlike stride, the effortless silence with which the Cimmerian moved along the trail. The oiled links of his armor did not clink, and Balthus knew Conan could glide through the deepest thicket or most tangled copse as noiselessly as any naked Pict that ever lived.

"You're not a Gunderman?" It was more assertion than question.

Balthus shook his head. "I'm from the Tauran."

"I've seen good woodsmen from the Tauran. But the Bossonians have sheltered you Aquilonians from the outer wildernesses for too many centuries. You need hardening."

That was true; the Bossonian marches, with their fortified villages filled with determined bowmen, had long served Aquilonia as a buffer against the outlying barbarians. Now among the settlers beyond Thunder River there was growing up a breed of forest-men capable of meeting the barbarians at their own game, but their numbers were still scanty. Most of the frontiersmen were like Balthus—more of the settler than the woodsman type.

The sun had not set, but it was no longer in sight, hidden as it was behind the dense forest wall. The shadows were lengthening, deepening back in the woods as the companions strode on down the trail.

"It will be dark before we reach the fort," commented Conan casually; then: "Listen!"

He stopped short, half crouching, sword ready, transformed into a savage figure of suspicion and menace, poised to spring and rend. Balthus had heard it too—a wild scream that broke at its highest note. It was the cry of a man in dire fear or agony.

Conan was off in an instant, racing down the trail, each stride widening the distance between him and his straining companion. Balthus puffed a curse. Among the settlements of the Tauran he was accounted a good runner, but Conan was leaving him behind with maddening ease. Then Balthus forgot his exasperation as his ears were outraged by the most frightful cry he had ever heard. It was not human, this one; it was a demoniacal caterwauling of hideous triumph that seemed to exult over fallen humanity and find echo in black gulfs beyond human ken.

Balthus faltered in his stride, and clammy sweat beaded his flesh. But Conan did not hesitate; he darted around a bend in the trail and disappeared, and Balthus, panicky at finding himself alone with that awful scream still shuddering through the forest in grisly echoes, put on an extra burst of speed and plunged after him.

The Aquilonian slid to a stumbling halt, almost colliding with the Cimmerian who stood in the trail over a crumpled body. But Conan was not looking at the corpse which lay there in the crimson-soaked dust. He was glaring into the deep woods on either side of the trail.

Balthus muttered a horrified oath. It was the body of a man which lay there in the trail, a short, fat man, clad in the gilt-worked boots and (despite the heat) the ermine-trimmed tunic of a wealthy merchant. His fat, pale face was set in a stare of frozen horror; his thick throat had been slashed from ear to ear as if by a razor-sharp blade. The short sword still in its scabbard seemed to indicate that he had been struck down without a chance to fight for his life.

"A Pict?" Balthus whispered, as he turned to peer into the deepening shadows of the forest.

Conan shook his head and straightened to scowl down at the dead man.

"A forest devil. This is the fifth, by Crom!"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever hear of a Pictish wizard called Zogar Sag?"

Balthus shook his head uneasily.

"He dwells in Gwawela, the nearest village across the river. Three months ago he hid beside this road and stole a string of pack-mules from a pack-train bound for the fort—drugged their drivers, somehow. The mules belonged to this man" —Conan casually indicated the corpse with his foot—"Tiberias, a merchant of Velitrium. They were loaded with ale-kegs, and old Zogar stopped to guzzle before he got across the river. A woodsman named Soractus trailed him, and led Valannus and three soldiers to where he lay dead drunk in a thicket. At the importunities of Tiberias, Valannus threw Zogar Sag into a cell, which is the worst insult you can give a Pict. He managed to kill his guard and escape, and sent back word that he meant to kill Tiberias and the five men who captured him in a way that would make Aquilonians shudder for centuries to come.

"Well, Soractus and the soldiers are dead. Soractus was killed on the river, the soldiers in the very shadow of the fort. And now Tiberias is dead. No Pict killed any of them. Each victim—except Tiberias, as you see—lacked his head—which no doubt is now ornamenting the altar of Zogar Sag's particular god."

"How do you know they weren't killed by the Picts?" demanded Balthus.

Conan pointed to the corpse of the merchant.

"You think that was done with a knife or a sword? Look closer and you'll see that only a talon could have made a gash like that. The flesh is ripped, not cut."

"Perhaps a panther——" began Balthus, without conviction.

Conan shook his head impatiently.

"A man from the Tauran couldn't mistake the mark of a panther's claws. No. It's a forest devil summoned by Zogar Sag to carry out his revenge. Tiberias was a fool to start for Velitrium alone, and so close to dusk. But each one of the victims seemed to be smitten with madness just before doom overtook him. Look here; the signs are plain enough. Tiberias came riding along the trail on his mule, maybe with a bundle of choice otter pelts behind his saddle to sell in Velitrium, and the *thing* sprang on him from behind that bush. See where the branches are crushed down.

"Tiberias gave one scream, and then his throat was torn open and he was selling his otter skins in Hell. The mule ran away into the woods. Listen! Even now you can hear him thrashing about under the trees. The demon didn't have time to take Tiberias' head; it took fright as we came up."

"As *you* came up," amended Balthus. "It must not be a very terrible creature if it flees from one armed man. But how do you know it was not a Pict with some kind of a hook that rips instead of slicing? Did you see it?"

"Tiberias was an armed man," grunted Conan. "If Zogar Sag can bring demons to aid him, he can tell them which men to kill and which to let alone. No, I didn't see it. I only saw the bushes shake as it left the trail. But if you want further proof, look here!"

The slayer had stepped into the pool of blood in which the dead man sprawled. Under the bushes at the edge of the path there was a footprint, made in blood on the hard loam.

"Did a man make that?" demanded Conan.

BALTHUS felt his scalp prickle. Neither man nor any beast that he had ever seen could have left that strange, monstrous three-toed print, that was curiously combined of the bird and the reptile, yet a true type of neither. He spread his fingers above the print, careful not to touch it, and grunted explosively. He could not span the mark.

"What is it?" he whispered. "I never saw a beast that left a spoor like that."

"Nor any other sane man," answered Conan grimly. "It's a swamp demon—they're thick as bats in the swamps beyond Black River. You can hear them howling like damned souls when the wind blows strong from the south on hot nights."

"What shall we do?" asked the Aquilonian, peering uneasily into the deep blue shadows. The frozen fear on the dead countenance haunted him. He wondered what hideous head the wretch had seen thrust grinning from among the leaves to chill his blood with terror.

"No use to try to follow a demon," grunted Conan, drawing a short woodman's ax from his girdle. "I tried tracking him after he killed Soractus. I lost

his trail within a dozen steps. He might have grown himself wings and flown away, or sunk down through the earth to Hell. I don't know. I'm not going after the mule, either. It'll either wander back to the fort, or to some settler's cabin."

As he spoke Conan was busy at the edge of the trail with his ax. With a few strokes he cut a pair of saplings nine or ten feet long, and denuded them of their branches. Then he cut a length from a serpent-like vine that crawled among the bushes near by, and making one end fast to one of the poles, a couple of feet from the end, whipped the vine over the other sapling and interlaced it back and forth. In a few moments he had a crude but strong litter.

"The demon isn't going to get Tiberias' head if I can help it," he growled. "We'll carry the body into the fort. It isn't more than three miles. I never liked the fat fool, but we can't have Pictish devils making so cursed free with white men's heads."

The Picts were a white race, though swarthy, but the border men never spoke of them as such.

Balthus took the rear end of the litter, onto which Conan unceremoniously dumped the unfortunate merchant, and they moved on down the trail as swiftly as possible. Conan made no more noise laden with their grim burden than he had made when unencumbered. He had made a loop with the merchant's belt at the end of the poles, and was carrying his share of the load with one hand, while the other gripped his naked broadsword, and his restless gaze roped the sinister walls about them. The shadows were thickening. A darkening blue mist blurred the outlines of the foliage. The forest deepened in the twilight, became a blue haunt of mystery sheltering unguessed things.

They had covered more than a mile, and the muscles in Balthus' sturdy arms were beginning to ache a little, when a cry rang shuddering from the woods whose blue shadows were deepening into purple.

Conan started convulsively, and Balthus almost let go the poles.

"A woman!" cried the younger man. "Great Mitra, a woman cried out then!"

"A settler's wife straying in the woods," snarled Conan, setting down his end of the litter. "Looking for a cow, probably, and—stay here!"

He dived like a hunting wolf into the leafy wall. Balthus' hair bristled.

"Stay here alone with this corpse and a devil hiding in the woods?" he yelped. "I'm coming with you!"

And suiting action to words, he plunged after the Cimmerian. Conan glanced back at him, but made no objection, though he did not moderate his pace to accommodate the shorter legs of his companion. Balthus wasted his wind in swearing as the Cimmerian drew away from him again, like a phantom between the trees, and then Conan burst into a dim glade and halted crouching, lips snarling, sword lifted.

"What are we stopping for?" panted Balthus, dashing the sweat out of his eyes and gripping his short sword.

"That scream came from this glade, or near by," answered Conan. "I don't mistake the location of sounds, even in the woods. But where——"

Abruptly the sound rang out again—*behind them;* in the direction of the trail they had just quitted. It rose piercingly and pitifully, the cry of a woman in frantic terror—and then, shockingly, it changed to a yell of mocking laughter that might have burst from the lips of a fiend of lower Hell.

"What in Mitra's name——" Balthus' face was a pale blur in the gloom.

With a scorching oath Conan wheeled

and dashed back the way he had come, and the Aquilonian stumbled bewildered-ly after him. He blundered into the Cimmerian as the latter stopped dead, and rebounded from his brawny shoulders as though from an iron statue. Gasping from the impact, he heard Conan's breath hiss through his teeth. The Cimmerian seemed frozen in his tracks.

Looking over his shoulder, Balthus felt his hair stand up stiffly. Something was moving through the deep bushes that fringed the trail—something that neither walked nor flew, but seemed to glide like a serpent. But it was not a serpent. Its outlines were indistinct, but it was taller than a man, and not very bulky. It gave off a glimmer of weird light, like a faint blue flame. Indeed, the eery fire was the only tangible thing about it. It might have been an embodied flame moving with reason and purpose through the blackening woods.

Conan snarled a savage curse and hurled his ax with ferocious will. But the thing glided on without altering its course. Indeed it was only a few instants' fleeting glimpse they had of it—a tall, shadowy thing of misty flame floating through the thickets. Then it was gone, and the forest crouched in breathless stillness.

With a snarl Conan plunged through the intervening foliage and into the trail. His profanity, as Balthus floundered after him, was lurid and impassioned. The Cimmerian was standing over the litter on which lay the body of Tiberias. And that body no longer possessed a head.

"Tricked us with its damnable caterwauling!" raved Conan, swinging his great sword about his head in his wrath. "I might have known! I might have guessed a trick! Now there'll be five heads to decorate Zogar's altar."

"But what thing is it that can cry like a woman and laugh like a devil, and shines like witch-fire as it glides through the trees?" gasped Balthus, mopping the sweat from his pale face.

"A swamp devil," responded Conan morosely. "Grab those poles. We'll take in the body, anyway. At least our load's a bit lighter."

With which grim philosophy he gripped the leathery loop and stalked down the trail.

2. *The Wizard of Gwawela*

FORT TUSCELAN stood on the eastern bank of Black River, the tides of which washed the foot of the stockade. The latter was of logs, as were all the buildings within, including the donjon (to dignify it by that appellation), in which were the governor's quarters, overlooking the stockade and the sullen river. Beyond that river lay a huge forest, which approached jungle-like density along the spongy shores. Men paced the runways along the log parapet day and night, watching that dense green wall. Seldom a menacing figure appeared, but the sentries knew that they too were watched, fiercely, hungrily, with the mercilessness of ancient hate. The forest beyond the river might seem desolate and vacant of life to the ignorant eye, but life teemed there, not alone of bird and beast and reptile, but also of men, the fiercest of all the hunting beasts.

There, at the fort, civilization ended. Fort Tuscelan was the last outpost of a civilized world; it represented the westernmost thrust of the dominant Hyborian races. Beyond the river the primitive still reigned in shadowy forests, brush-thatched huts where hung the grinning skulls of men, and mud-walled enclosures where fires flickered and drums rumbled, and spears were whetted in the hands of dark, silent men with tangled black hair and the eyes of serpents. Those eyes often

glared through the bushes at the fort across the river. Once dark-skinned men had built their huts where that fort stood; yes, and their huts had risen where now stood the fields and log cabins of fair-haired settlers, back beyond Velitrium, that raw, turbulent frontier town on the banks of Thunder River, to the shores of that other river that bounds the Bossonian marches. Traders had come, and priests of Mitra who walked with bare feet and empty hands, and died horribly, most of them; but soldiers had followed, and men with axes in their hands and women and children in ox-drawn wains. Back to Thunder River, and still back, beyond Black River, the aborigines had been pushed, with slaughter and massacre. But the dark-skinned people did not forget that once Conajohara had been theirs.

The guard inside the eastern gate bawled a challenge. Through a barred aperture torchlight flickered, glinting on a steel head-piece and suspicious eyes beneath it.

"Open the gate," snorted Conan. "You see it's I, don't you?"

Military discipline put his teeth on edge.

The gate swung inward and Conan and his companion passed through. Balthus noted that the gate was flanked by a tower on each side, the summits of which rose above the stockade. He saw loopholes for arrows.

The guardsmen grunted as they saw the burden borne between the men. Their pikes jangled against each other as they thrust shut the gate, chin on shoulder, and Conan asked testily: "Have you never seen a headless body before?"

The faces of the soldiers were pallid in the torchlight.

"That's Tiberias," blurted one. "I recognize that fur-trimmed tunic. Valerius here owes me five lunas. I told him Tiberias had heard the loon call when he rode through the gate on his mule, with his glassy stare. I wagered he'd come back without his head."

Conan grunted enigmatically, motioned Balthus to ease the litter to the ground, and then strode off toward the governor's quarters, with the Aquilonian at his heels. The tousle-headed youth stared about him eagerly and curiously, noting the rows of barracks along the walls, the stables, the tiny merchants' stalls, the towering blockhouse, and the other buildings, with the open square in the middle where the soldiers drilled, and where, now, fires danced and men off duty lounged. These were now hurrying to join the morbid crowd gathered about the litter at the gate. The rangy figures of Aquilonian pikemen and forest runners mingled with the shorter, stockier forms of Bossonian archers.

He was not greatly surprized that the governor received them himself. Autocratic society with its rigid caste laws lay east of the marches. Valannus was still a young man, well knit, with a finely chiseled countenance already carved into sober cast by toil and responsibility.

"You left the fort before daybreak, I was told," he said to Conan. "I had begun to fear that the Picts had caught you at last."

"When they smoke my head the whole river will know it," grunted Conan. "They'll hear Pictish women wailing their dead as far as Velitrium—I was on a lone scout. I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing drums talking across the river."

"They talk each night," reminded the governor, his fine eyes shadowed, as he stared closely at Conan. He had learned the unwisdom of discounting wild men's instincts.

"There was a difference last night," growled Conan. "There has been ever since Zogar Sag got back across the river."

"We should either have given him

presents and sent him home, or else hanged him," sighed the governor. "You advised that, but——"

"But it's hard for you Hyborians to learn the ways of the outlands," said Conan. "Well, it can't be helped now, but there'll be no peace on the border so long as Zogar lives and remembers the cell he sweated in. I was following a warrior who slipped over to put a few white notches on his bow. After I split his head I fell in with this lad whose name is Balthus and who's come from the Tauran to help hold the frontier."

Valannus approvingly eyed the young man's frank countenance and strongly-knit frame.

"I am glad to welcome you, young sir. I wish more of your people would come. We need men used to forest life. Many of our soldiers and some of our settlers are from the eastern provinces and know nothing of woodcraft, or even of agricultural life."

"Not many of that breed this side of Velitrium," grunted Conan. "That town's full of them, though. But listen, Valannus, we found Tiberias dead on the trail." And in a few words he related the grisly affair.

Valannus paled. "I did not know he had left the fort. He must have been mad!"

"He was," answered Conan. "Like the other four; each one, when his time came, went mad and rushed into the woods to meet his death like a hare running down the throat of a python. *Something* called to them from the deeps of the forest, something the men call a loon, for lack of a better name, but only the doomed ones could hear it. Zogar Sag has made a magic that Aquilonian civilization can't overcome."

To this thrust Valannus made no reply; he wiped his brow with a shaky hand.

"Do the soldiers know of this?"

"We left the body by the eastern gate."

"You should have concealed the fact, hidden the corpse somewhere in the woods. The soldiers are nervous enough already."

"They'd have found it out some way. If I'd hidden the body, it would have been returned to the fort as the corpse of Soractus was—tied up outside the gate for the men to find in the morning."

VALANNUS shuddered. Turning, he walked to a casement and stared silently out over the river, black and shiny under the glint of the stars. Beyond the river the jungle rose like an ebony wall. The distant screech of a panther broke the stillness. The night pressed in, blurring the sounds of the soldiers outside the blockhouse, dimming the fires. A wind whispered through the black branches, rippling the dusky water. On its wings came a low, rhythmic pulsing, sinister as the pad of a leopard's foot.

"After all," said Valannus, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, "what do we know—what does anyone know—of the things that jungle may hide? We have dim rumors of great swamps and rivers, and a forest that stretches on and on over everlasting plains and hills to end at last on the shores of the western ocean. But what things lie between this river and that ocean we dare not even guess. No white man has ever plunged deep into that fastness and returned alive to tell us what he found. We are wise in our civilized knowledge, but our knowledge extends just so far—to the western bank of that ancient river! Who knows what shapes earthly and unearthly may lurk beyond the dim circle of light our knowledge has cast?

"Who knows what gods are worshipped under the shadows of that heath-

en forest, or what devils crawl out of the black ooze of the swamps? Who can be sure that all the inhabitants of that black country are natural? Zogar Sag—a sage of the eastern cities would sneer at his primitive magic-making as the mummery of a fakir; yet he has driven mad and killed five men in a manner no man can explain. I wonder if he himself is wholly human."

"If I can get within ax-throwing distance of him I'll settle that question," growled Conan, helping himself to the governor's wine and pushing a glass toward Balthus, who took it hesitatingly, and with an uncertain glance toward Valannus.

The governor turned toward Conan and stared at him thoughtfully.

"The soldiers, who do not believe in ghosts or devils," he said, "are almost in a panic of fear. You, who believe in ghosts, ghouls, goblins, and all manner of uncanny things, do not seem to fear any of the things in which you believe."

"There's nothing in the universe cold steel won't cut," answered Conan. "I threw my ax at the demon, and he took no hurt, but I might have missed, in the dusk, or a branch deflected its flight. I'm not going out of my way looking for devils; but I wouldn't step out of my path to let one go by."

Valannus lifted his head and met Conan's gaze squarely.

"Conan, more depends on you than you realize. You know the weakness of this province—a slender wedge thrust into the untamed wilderness. You know that the lives of all the people west of the marches depend on this fort. Were it to fall, red axes would be splintering the gates of Velitrium before a horseman could cross the marches. His majesty, or his majesty's advisers, have ignored my plea that more troops be sent to hold the frontier. They know nothing of border conditions, and are averse to expending any more money in this direction. The fate of the frontier depends upon the men who now hold it.

"You know that most of the army which conquered Conajohara has been withdrawn. You know the force left me is inadequate, especially since that devil Zogar Sag managed to poison our water supply, and forty men died in one day. Many of the others are sick, or have been bitten by serpents or mauled by wild beasts which seem to swarm in increasing numbers in the vicinity of the fort. The soldiers believe Zogar's boast that he could summon the forest beasts to slay his enemies.

"I have three hundred pikemen, four hundred Bossonian archers, and perhaps fifty men who, like yourself, are skilled in woodcraft. They are worth ten times their number of soldiers, but there are so few of them. Frankly, Conan, my situation is becoming precarious. The soldiers whisper of desertion; they are low-spirited, believing Zogar Sag has loosed devils on us. They fear the black plague with which he threatened us—the terrible black death of the swamplands. When I see a sick soldier I sweat with fear of seeing him turn black and shrivel and die before my eyes.

"Conan, if the plague is loosed upon us, the soldiers will desert in a body! The border will be left unguarded and nothing will check the sweep of the dark-skinned hordes to the very gates of Velitrium—maybe beyond! If we can not hold the fort, how can they hold the town?

"Conan, Zogar Sag must die, if we are to hold Conajohara. You have penetrated the unknown deeper than any other man in the fort; you know where Gwawela stands, and something of the forest trails

across the river. Will you take a band of men tonight and endeavor to kill or capture him? Oh, I know it's mad. There isn't more than one chance in a thousand that any of you will come back alive. But if we don't get him, it's death for us all. You can take as many men as you wish."

"A dozen men are better for a job like that than a regiment," answered Conan. "Five hundred men couldn't fight their way to Gwawela and back, but a dozen might slip in and out again. Let me pick my men. I don't want any soldiers."

"Let me go!" eagerly exclaimed Balthus. "I've hunted deer all my life on the Tauran."

"All right. Valannus, we'll eat at the stall where the foresters gather, and I'll pick my men. We'll start within an hour, drop down the river in a boat to a point below the village and then steal upon it through the woods. If we live, we should be back by daybreak."

3. The Crawlers in the Dark

THE river was a vague trace between walls of ebony. The paddles that propelled the long boat creeping along in the dense shadow of the eastern bank dipped softly into the water, making no more noise than the beak of a heron. The broad shoulders of the man in front of Balthus were a blur in the dense gloom. He knew that not even the keen eyes of the man who knelt in the prow would discern anything more than a few feet ahead of them. Conan was feeling his way by instinct and an intensive familiarity with the river.

No one spoke. Balthus had had a good look at his companions in the fort before they slipped out of the stockade and down the bank into the waiting canoe. They were of a new breed growing up in the world on the raw edge of the frontier—men whom grim necessity had taught woodcraft. Aquilonians of the western provinces to a man, they had many points in common. They dressed alike—in buckskin boots, leathern breeks and deerskin shirts, with broad girdles that held axes and short swords; and they were all gaunt and scarred and hard-eyed; sinewy and taciturn.

They were wild men, of a sort, yet there was still a wide gulf between them and the Cimmerian. They were sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism. He was a barbarian of a thousand generations of barbarians. They had acquired stealth and craft, but he had been born to these things. He excelled them even in lithe economy of motion. They were wolves, but he was a tiger.

Balthus admired them and their leader and felt a pulse of pride that he was admitted into their company. He was proud that his paddle made no more noise than did theirs. In that respect at least he was their equal, though woodcraft learned in hunts on the Tauran could never equal that ground into the souls of men on the savage border.

Below the fort the river made a wide bend. The lights of the outpost were quickly lost, but the canoe held on its way for nearly a mile, avoiding snags and floating logs with almost uncanny precision.

Then a low grunt from their leader, and they swung its head about and glided toward the opposite shore. Emerging from the black shadows of the brush that fringed the bank and coming into the open of the midstream created a peculiar illusion of rash exposure. But the stars gave little light, and Balthus knew that unless one were watching for it, it would be all but impossible for the keenest eye to make out the shadowy shape of the canoe crossing the river.

They swung in under the overhanging bushes of the western shore and Balthus groped for and found a projecting root which he grasped. No word was spoken. All instructions had been given before the scouting-party left the fort. As silently as a great panther Conan slid over the side and vanished in the bushes. Equally noiseless, nine men followed him. To Balthus, grasping the root with his paddle across his knee, it seemed incredible that ten men should thus fade into the tangled forest without a sound.

He settled himself to wait. No word passed between him and the other man who had been left with him. Somewhere, a mile or so to the northwest, Zogar Sag's village stood girdled with thick woods. Balthus understood his orders; he and his companion were to wait for the return of the raiding-party. If Conan and his men had not returned by the first tinge of dawn, they were to race back up the river to the fort and report that the forest had again taken its immemorial toll of the invading race. The silence was oppressive. No sound came from the black woods, invisible beyond the ebony masses that were the overhanging bushes. Balthus no longer heard the drums. They had been silent for hours. He kept blinking, unconsciously trying to see through the deep gloom. The dank night-smells of the river and the damp forest oppressed him. Somewhere, near by, there was a sound as if a big fish had flopped and splashed the water. Balthus thought it must have leaped so close to the canoe that it had struck the side, for a slight quiver vibrated the craft. The boat's stern began to swing, slightly away from the shore. The man behind him must have let go of the projection he was gripping. Balthus twisted his head to hiss a warning, and could just make out the figure of his companion, a slightly blacker bulk in the blackness.

The man did not reply. Wondering if he had fallen asleep, Balthus reached out and grasped his shoulder. To his amazement, the man crumpled under his touch and slumped down in the canoe. Twisting his body half about, Balthus groped for him, his heart shooting into his throat. His fumbling fingers slid over the man's throat—only the youth's convulsive clenching of his jaws choked back the cry that rose to his lips. His fingers encountered a gaping, oozing wound—his companion's throat had been cut from ear to ear.

In that instant of horror and panic Balthus started up—and then a muscular arm out of the darkness locked fiercely about his throat, strangling his yell. The canoe rocked wildly. Balthus' knife was in his hand, though he did not remember jerking it out of his boot, and he stabbed fiercely and blindly. He felt the blade sink deep, and a fiendish yell rang in his ear, a yell that was horribly answered. The darkness seemed to come to life about him. A bestial clamor rose on all sides, and other arms grappled him. Borne under a mass of hurtling bodies the canoe rolled sidewise, but before he went under with it, something cracked against Balthus' head and the night was briefly illuminated by a blinding burst of fire before it gave way to a blackness where not even stars shone.

4. The Beasts of Zogar Sag

FIRES dazzled Balthus again as he slowly recovered his senses. He blinked, shook his head. Their glare hurt his eyes. A confused medley of sound rose about him, growing more distinct as his senses cleared. He lifted his head and stared stupidly about him. Black figures hemmed him in, etched against crimson tongues of flame.

Memory and understanding came in a

rush. He was bound upright to a post in an open space, ringed by fierce and terrible figures. Beyond that ring fires burned, tended by naked, dark-skinned women. Beyond the fires he saw huts of mud and wattle, thatched with brush. Beyond the huts there was a stockade with a broad gate. But he saw these things only incidentally. Even the cryptic dark women with their curious coiffures were noted by him only absently. His full attention was fixed in awful fascination on the men who stood glaring at him.

Short men, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, they were naked except for scanty loin-clouts. The firelight brought out the play of their swelling muscles in bold relief. Their dark faces were immobile, but their narrow eyes glittered with the fire that burns in the eyes of a stalking tiger. Their tangled manes were bound back with bands of copper. Swords and axes were in their hands. Crude bandages banded the limbs of some, and smears of blood were dried on their dark skins. There had been fighting, recent and deadly.

His eyes wavered away from the steady glare of his captors, and he repressed a cry of horror. A few feet away there rose a low, hideous pyramid: it was built of gory human heads. Dead eyes glared glassily up at the black sky. Numbly he recognized the countenances which were turned toward him. They were the heads of the men who had followed Conan into the forest. He could not tell if the Cimmerian's head were among them. Only a few faces were visible to him. It looked to him as if there must be ten or eleven heads at least. A deadly sickness assailed him. He fought a desire to retch. Beyond the heads lay the bodies of half a dozen Picts, and he was aware of a fierce exultation at the sight. The forest runners had taken toll, at least.

Twisting his head away from the ghastly spectacle, he became aware that another post stood near him—a stake painted black as was the one to which he was bound. A man sagged in his bonds there, naked except for his leathern breeks, whom Balthus recognized as one of Conan's woodsmen. Blood trickled from his mouth, oozed sluggishly from a gash in his side. Lifting his head as he licked his livid lips, he muttered, making himself heard with difficulty above the fiendish clamor of the Picts: "So they got you, too!"

"Sneaked up in the water and cut the other fellow's throat," groaned Balthus. "We never heard them till they were on us. Mitra, how can anything move so silently?"

"They're devils," mumbled the frontiersman. "They must have been watching us from the time we left midstream. We walked into a trap. Arrows from all sides were ripping into us before we knew it. Most of us dropped at the first fire. Three or four broke through the bushes and came to hand-grips. But there were too many. Conan might have gotten away. I haven't seen his head. Been better for you and me if they'd killed us outright. I can't blame Conan. Ordinarily we'd have gotten to the village without being discovered. They don't keep spies on the river bank as far down as we landed. We must have stumbled into a big party coming up the river from the south. Some devilment is up. Too many Picts here. These aren't all Gwaweli; men from the western tribes here and from up and down the river."

Balthus stared at the ferocious shapes. Little as he knew of Pictish ways, he was aware that the number of men clustered about them was out of proportion to the size of the village. There were not enough huts to have accommodated them all. Then he noticed that there was a differ-

ence in the barbaric tribal designs painted on their faces and breasts.

"Some kind of devilment," muttered the forest runner. "They might have gathered here to watch Zogar's magic-making. He'll make some rare magic with our carcasses. Well, a border-man doesn't expect to die in bed. But I wish we'd gone out along with the rest."

The wolfish howling of the Picts rose in volume and exultation, and from a movement in their ranks, an eager surging and crowding, Balthus deduced that someone of importance was coming. Twisting his head about, he saw that the stakes were set before a long building, larger than the other huts, decorated by human skulls dangling from the eaves. Through the door of that structure now danced a fantastic figure.

"Zogar!" muttered the woodsman, his bloody countenance set in wolfish lines as he unconsciously strained at his cords. Balthus saw a lean figure of middle height, almost hidden in ostrich plumes set on a harness of leather and copper. From amidst the plumes peered a hideous and malevolent face. The plumes puzzled Balthus. He knew their source lay half the width of a world to the south. They fluttered and rustled evilly as the shaman leaped and cavorted.

With fantastic bounds and prancings he entered the ring and whirled before his bound and silent captives. With another man it would have seemed ridiculous—a foolish savage prancing meaninglessly in a whirl of feathers. But that ferocious face glaring out from the billowing mass gave the scene a grim significance. No man with a face like that could seem ridiculous or like anything except the devil he was.

Suddenly he froze to statuesque stillness; the plumes rippled once and sank about him. The howling warriors fell silent. Zogar Sag stood erect and motionless, and he seemed to increase in height—to grow and expand. Balthus experienced the illusion that the Pict was towering above him, staring contemptuously down from a great height, though he knew the shaman was not as tall as himself. He shook off the illusion with difficulty.

The shaman was talking now, a harsh, guttural intonation that yet carried the hiss of a cobra. He thrust his head on his long neck toward the wounded man on the stake; his eyes shone red as blood in the firelight. The frontiersman spat full in his face.

With a fiendish howl Zogar bounded convulsively into the air, and the warriors gave tongue to a yell that shuddered up to the stars. They rushed toward the man on the stake, but the shaman beat them back. A snarled command sent men running to the gate. They hurled it open, turned and raced back to the circle. The ring of men split, divided with desperate haste to right and left. Balthus saw the women and naked children scurrying to the huts. They peeked out of doors and windows. A broad lane was left to the open gate, beyond which loomed the black forest, crowding sullenly in upon the clearing, unlighted by the fires.

A TENSE silence reigned as Zogar Sag turned toward the forest, raised on his tiptoes and sent a weird inhuman call shuddering out into the night. Somewhere, far out in the black forest, a deeper cry answered him. Balthus shuddered. From the timbre of that cry he knew it never came from a human throat. He remembered what Valannus had said—that Zogar boasted that he could summon wild beasts to do his bidding. The woodsman was livid beneath his mask of blood. He licked his lips spasmodically.

The village held its breath. Zogar Sag stood still as a statue, his plumes trem-

bling faintly about him. But suddenly the gate was no longer empty.

A shuddering gasp swept over the village and men crowded hastily back, jamming one another between the huts. Balthus felt the short hair stir on his scalp. The creature that stood in the gate was like the embodiment of nightmare legend. Its color was of a curious pale quality which made it seem ghostly and unreal in the dim light. But there was nothing unreal about the low-hung savage head, and the great curved fangs that glistened in the firelight. On noiseless padded feet it approached like a phantom out of the past. It was a survival of an older, grimmer age, the ogre of many an ancient legend—a saber-tooth tiger. No Hyborian hunter had looked upon one of those primordial brutes for centuries. Immemorial myths lent the creatures a supernatural quality, induced by their ghostly color and their fiendish ferocity.

The beast that glided toward the men on the stakes was longer and heavier than a common, striped tiger, almost as bulky as a bear. Its shoulders and forelegs were so massive and mightily muscled as to give it a curiously top-heavy look, though its hind-quarters were more powerful than that of a lion. Its jaws were massive, but its head was brutishly shaped. Its brain capacity was small. It had room for no instincts except those of destruction. It was a freak of carnivorous development, evolution run amuck in a horror of fangs and talons.

This was the monstrosity Zogar Sag had summoned out of the forest. Balthus no longer doubted the actuality of the shaman's magic. Only the black arts could establish a domination over that tiny-brained, mighty-thewed monster. Like a whisper at the back of his consciousness rose the vague memory of the name of an ancient god of darkness and primordial fear, to whom once both men and beasts bowed and whose children—men whispered—still lurked in dark corners of the world. New horror tinged the glare he fixed on Zogar Sag.

The monster moved past the heap of bodies and the pile of gory heads without appearing to notice them. He was no scavenger. He hunted only the living, in a life dedicated solely to slaughter. An awful hunger burned greenly in the wide, unwinking eyes; the hunger not alone of belly-emptiness, but the lust of death-dealing. His gaping jaws slavered. The shaman stepped back; his hand waved toward the woodsman.

The great cat sank into a crouch, and Balthus numbly remembered tales of its appalling ferocity: of how it would spring upon an elephant and drive its sword-like fangs so deeply into the titan's skull that they could never be withdrawn, but would keep it nailed to its victim, to die by starvation. The shaman cried out shrilly, and with an ear-shattering roar the monster sprang.

Balthus had never dreamed of such a spring, such a hurtling of incarnated destruction embodied in that giant bulk of iron thews and ripping talons. Full on the woodsman's breast it struck, and the stake splintered and snapped at the base, crashing to the earth under the impact. Then the saber-tooth was gliding toward the gate, half dragging, half carrying a hideous crimson hulk that only faintly resembled a man. Balthus glared almost paralyzed, his brain refusing to credit what his eyes had seen.

In that leap the great beast had not only broken off the stake, it had ripped the mangled body of its victim from the post to which it was bound. The huge talons in that instant of contact had disemboweled and partially dismembered the man, and the giant fangs had torn away

the whole top of his head, shearing through the skull as easily as through flesh. Stout rawhide thongs had given way like paper; where the thongs had held, flesh and bones had not. Balthus retched suddenly. He had hunted bears and panthers, but he had never dreamed the beast lived which could make such a red ruin of a human frame in the flicker of an instant.

The saber-tooth vanished through the gate, and a few moments later a deep roar sounded through the forest, receding in the distance. But the Picts still shrank back against the huts, and the shaman still stood facing the gate that was like a black opening to let in the night.

Cold sweat burst suddenly out on Balthus' skin. What new horror would come through that gate to make carrion-meat of *his* body? Sick panic assailed him and he strained futilely at his thongs. The night pressed in very black and horrible outside the firelight. The fires themselves glowed lurid as the fires of hell. He felt the eyes of the Picts upon him—hundreds of hungry, cruel eyes that reflected the lust of souls utterly without humanity as he knew it. They no longer seemed men; they were devils of this black jungle, as inhuman as the creatures to which the fiend in the nodding plumes screamed through the darkness.

ZOGAR sent another call shuddering through the night, and it was utterly unlike the first cry. There was a hideous sibilance in it—Balthus turned cold at the implication. If a serpent could hiss that loud, it would make just such a sound.

This time there was no answer—only a period of breathless silence in which the pound of Balthus' heart strangled him; and then there sounded a swishing outside the gate, a dry rustling that sent chills down Balthus' spine. Again the firelit gate held a hideous occupant.

Again Balthus recognized the monster from ancient legends. He saw and knew the ancient and evil serpent which swayed there, its wedge-shaped head, huge as that of a horse, as high as a tall man's head, and its palely gleaming barrel rippling out behind it. A forked tongue darted in and out, and the firelight glittered on bared fangs.

Balthus became incapable of emotion. The horror of his fate paralyzed him. That was the reptile that the ancients called Ghost Snake, the pale, abominable terror that of old glided into huts by night to devour whole families. Like the python it crushed its victim, but unlike other constrictors its fangs bore venom that carried madness and death. It too had long been considered extinct. But Valannus had spoken truly. No white man knew what shapes haunted the great forests beyond Black River.

It came on silently, rippling over the ground, its hideous head on the same level, its neck curving back slightly for the stroke. Balthus gazed with glazed, hypnotized stare into that loathsome gullet down which he would soon be engulfed, and he was aware of no sensation except a vague nausea.

And then something that glinted in the firelight streaked from the shadows of the huts, and the great reptile whipped about and went into instant convulsions. As in a dream Balthus saw a short throwing-spear transfixing the mighty neck, just below the gaping jaws; the shaft protruded from one side, the steel head from the other.

Knotting and looping hideously, the maddened reptile rolled into the circle of men who strove back from him. The spear had not severed its spine, but merely transfixed its great neck muscles. Its furiously

lashing tail mowed down a dozen men and its jaws snapped convulsively, splashing others with venom that burned like liquid fire. Howling, cursing, screaming, frantic, they scattered before it, knocking each other down in their flight, trampling the fallen, bursting through the huts. The giant snake rolled into a fire, scattering sparks and brands, and the pain lashed it to more frenzied efforts. A hut wall buckled under the ram-like impact of its flailing tail, disgorging howling people.

Men stampeded through the fires, knocking the logs right and left. The flames sprang up, then sank. A reddish dim glow was all that lighted that nightmare scene where the giant reptile whipped and rolled, and men clawed and shrieked in frantic flight.

Balthus felt something jerk at his wrists, and then, miraculously, he was free, and a strong hand dragged him behind the post. Dazedly he saw Conan, felt the forest man's iron grip on his arm.

There was blood on the Cimmerian's mail, dried blood on the sword in his right hand; he loomed dim and gigantic in the shadowy light.

"Come on! Before they get over their panic!"

Balthus felt the haft of an ax shoved into his hand. Zogar Sag had disappeared. Conan dragged Balthus after him until the youth's numb brain awoke, and his legs began to move of their own accord. Then Conan released him and ran into the building where the skulls hung. Balthus followed him. He got a glimpse of a grim stone altar, faintly lighted by the glow outside; five human heads grinned on that altar, and there was a grisly familiarity about the features of the freshest; it was the head of the merchant Tiberias. Behind the altar was an idol, dim, indistinct, bestial, yet vaguely man-like in outline. Then fresh horror choked Balthus as the shape heaved up suddenly with a rattle of chains, lifting long misshapen arms in the gloom.

Conan's sword flailed down, crunching through flesh and bone, and then the Cimmerian was dragging Balthus around the altar, past a huddled shaggy bulk on the floor, to a door at the back of the long hut. Through this they burst, out into the enclosure again. But a few yards beyond them loomed the stockade.

It was dark behind the altar-hut. The mad stampede of the Picts had not carried them in that direction. At the wall Conan halted, gripped Balthus and heaved him at arm's length into the air as he might have lifted a child. Balthus grasped the points of the upright logs set in the sun-dried mud and scrambled up on them, ignoring the havoc done his skin. He lowered a hand to the Cimmerian, when around a corner of the altar-hut sprang a fleeing Pict. He halted short, glimpsing the man on the wall in the faint glow of the fires. Conan hurled his ax with deadly aim, but the warrior's mouth was already open for a yell of warning, and it rang loud above the din, cut short as he dropped with a shattered skull.

Blinding terror had not submerged all ingrained instincts. As that wild yell rose above the clamor, there was an instant's lull, and then a hundred throats bayed ferocious answer and warriors came leaping to repel the attack presaged by the warning.

Conan leaped high, caught, not Balthus' hand but his arm near the shoulder, and swung himself up. Balthus set his teeth against the strain, and then the Cimmerian was on the wall beside him, and the fugitives dropped down on the other side.

Don't miss the utterly thrilling chapters that bring this story to a weird and startling conclusion in next month's issue of WEIRD TALES.

W. T.—5

"Drawn by a power he could not resist, Tane stepped forward."

Lord of the Lamia

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

John Tane, archeologist, was not afraid of man or beast, but he faced a baffling, sinister mystery in ancient Cairo

The Story Thus Far

JOHN TANE, a young archeologist, rents a house in Cairo from Doctor Schneider, a German archeologist. A few minutes later, a Moslem funeral procession enters the courtyard, and the coffin, presumably containing the body of a *welee,* or saint, is walled up in one end of the reception room for burial.

That night Tane is drugged, but awakens at midnight, and on descending to the lower rooms, finds a strange Persian read-

This story began in WEIRD TALES for March

ing a scroll before a niche in the room next to the burial place. The man attacks him, then flees.

Tane examines the scroll, and reading it aloud, finds it is a magic formula for raising the dead. Then he notices a coffin inside the niche, behind two guttering candles. In the coffin he finds a mummy-case containing a queen's crown and a mummied cobra, which he unwraps. The serpent comes to life. One candle burns out and the snake knocks over the other. He hurls the crown at it, then lights a match, and finds that it has disappeared, but that Doctor Schneider is lying beneath a pile of rugs and cushions on the diwan, having been knocked out.

He and the doctor look for the serpent, and learn that the doorkeeper has been murdered. The doctor calls the police, who try to arrest Tane for murder, and insists that his story is false, as the niche has, in the meantime, been closed by some secret manipulation. Tane is arrested and taken to the house of Hagg Nadeem, an Egyptian official credited with magic powers. While in Nadeem's house he is visited by a serpent which appears to change into a beautiful woman who calls him the "Lord of her Awakening." She then resumes her serpent form and leaves.

Hagg Nadeem tells Tane that he has seen Lamia, the strange serpent-woman who once ruled Libya. Then the *hagg* releases him and he returns to his home. There he is captured, wrapped in a rug, and taken to an oasis in the desert, where the leader of his captors, Shaykh Ibrahim, demands that he read a magic formula ceding Lamia to himself, or die. Tane reads the formula, the Lamia appears and kills the *shaykh,* while his men flee. Then Lamia disappears, and Hagg Nadeem steps into the tent. He takes Tane back to Cairo on a swift camel.

On their return to Tane's house they find it has been completely furnished, as if by magic, and Tane's frightened servant tells them this was done by Lamia and her slaves, whom he believes to be *jinn.* Hagg Nadeem leaves, promising to send Tane two servants on the morrow. That night Tane awakens in the clutches of a strangler, with a cord around his throat and knuckles pressed into the back of his neck.

The story continues:

10. The Stranglers

WITH the awful realization that death was upon him, Tane suddenly recalled the yatagan at his side. Still on the borderline of consciousness, he grasped it, wrenched it from its sheath, and with all his remaining strength, drove the point straight back over his shoulder at his unseen assailant. It encountered something solid, there was a gurgling gasp behind him, and the weapon stuck. Then the strangling cord about his throat relaxed and the pressure of those boring knuckles ceased.

For more than a minute Tane lay there, struggling to get his breath. Gradually his vision cleared, and he sat up, swinging his feet over the edge of the diwan. They encountered the body of a man, lying on his back with the yatagan projecting upward from his face. The point had plunged through his right eye into the brain, and the blade had wedged in the bony orbit.

Suddenly Tane became conscious of the fact that there was a struggle going on in the *majlis.* He stood up dizzily. Then, placing his foot on the bearded face of his vanquished enemy, he wrenched the blade free and staggered to the door.

The moonlight revealed a sight that made his blood boil. Two assassins had dragged Ali from his diwan and spread-eagled him on the floor, each gripping a

wrist. A third knelt on his back, holding a narrow strangling-cord which passed around the Syrian's throat, his knuckles pressing the helpless servant's cervical vertebræ.

With a shout of rage, Tane raised his yatagan and lurched toward them. The two men holding the Syrian's arms instantly sprang erect, and whipping out their simitars, charged the American. Ali was apparently too weak to struggle further, for he lay quietly, the third man still kneeling on his back.

Tane parried a vicious head-cut from the foremost assailant, and countered with a swift shoulder-cut which, only partly deflected, slightly wounded his opponent. But while the American's blade was still extended, the second assassin caught him unguarded with a swift neck-cut. Tane stepped back, but not far enough, and the point of the simitar raked his chest beneath his chin, making a long gash from which the blood spurted.

As he drew to avoid that blade, Tane saw something else—a sinuous, scaly something which darted up and fastened itself on the arm of the man who knelt on Ali's back. As he came on guard again, Tane saw the strangler topple, then pitch sideways and roll over on his back beside his victim.

Tane's two remaining opponents were circling now, to the right and left. Realizing that with this stratagem they would soon have him at their mercy, he reeled backward until his shoulders struck the wall. Had he been able to reach a corner he would have been better able to defend himself. As it was, the wall only afforded partial protection by keeping his enemies from getting behind him. Though he had recovered somewhat from the strangulation, he was losing blood rapidly, and felt himself growing weaker. Both his assailants seemed to realize this, and sprang in together to the attack.

By simultaneously dodging one blade and parrying the other, Tane was able to maneuver himself into position for a lunge at the fellow on his right. The man leaped back, easily avoiding his point, then grunted, dropped his simitar, and pitched to the floor. For the scaly, serpentine thing had suddenly flashed upward and attached itself to the calf of his leg.

Now left with but one enemy, Tane, despite his weakened condition, forced the fight. His strength was ebbing fast, and although he knew that he was a better swordsman than the man he faced, he realized that he must win quickly, if at all. He raised his blade, and brought it down in a sweeping moulinet, as if he would lay the fellow's head open. But as the simitar was raised to parry, he swiftly drew back his weapon and lunged straight for the hairy throat. The point went true to the mark, and the last enemy collapsed, strangling in his own blood.

But Tane had reached the limit of his endurance. He staggered toward Ali, and fell on his face. By exerting every ounce of his remaining strength, he managed to get to his hands and knees, and crawl to the side of his servant. With trembling fingers, he undid the cord that was twisted around Ali's neck. Then he collapsed beside him, conscious, but too weak even to sit up.

Suddenly he was aware, by the golden radiance which suffused the room, that someone had lighted a lamp. A soft musical voice was murmuring in his ear in the language of ancient Egypt, and the scent of an exotic perfume mingled with the tang of blood in his nostrils.

"Have no fear, Lord of my Awakening. It is I, Lamia, come to serve you."

A small hand reached beneath his shoulder, assisting him to turn over, and dimly,

through the swimming haze of his receding senses, he saw *her*. Behind her stood two giant negroes—or were they negroes? They wore the dress of harem guards of old Egypt—slaves who had been dust for five thousand years. And from each towering, woolly head sprouted a pair of horns.

From the negroes, Tane looked dazedly back at the slender, lovely girl who wore the ancient golden crown with its uræus and nodding plumes. With deft, sure hands, she undid his slashed pajamas and examined the wound in his chest.

"The sponge and water, Anpu," she said, without looking up.

Instantly, one of the giant blacks knelt beside her, saying: "To hear is to obey, Majesty," and tendered a brass basin, in the center of which was a small sponge. She took it up, and the negro poured water on it from a brass ewer.

Gently she bathed the gaping wound. Then she called for ointment, bandages and gum, which the other black instantly tendered. The ointment, which had a pungent and not unpleasing smell, instantly stopped the bleeding and, at the same time, deadened the pain. Then she applied the bandages, fastening them in place with bits of the gum, which hardened almost instantly when exposed to the air.

"My servant. See to him, please," said Tane, indicating Ali.

"Later, my lord," she replied. "Do not worry about him. He is breathing, and unwounded." She arose. "Carry my lord to his couch," she ordered.

The two black giants lifted the six-foot American as easily as if he had been a child, and carried him into his bedchamber. The girl followed them, lighting the lamp in a manner which greatly puzzled him. For all he saw her do was point her index finger at it, whereupon it flamed up as if a match had been applied. After the two blacks had lowered Tane to the diwan, they stood back, one at the head and the other at the foot, with arms folded.

"Now attend to the other," she ordered them. "And, Anpu, bring me water and a cup."

As the two negroes departed to do her bidding, she knelt beside the diwan and laid her hand on Tane's forehead. "No fever," she murmured. "That is good."

Tane was thrilled by the touch of that soft, velvety palm, and by the look of concern in the big black eyes. Why, this girl was real—she was human! She must be. And yet, when he looked more closely, what he saw through the filmy veil she wore made him gasp. For the white skin of her arms and body was covered with tiny, glistening scales!

Anpu, the black giant, strode into the room carrying gugglet and cup, which he presented, kneeling, to the divine creature at Tane's side.

"Fill the cup," she commanded.

The black instantly complied.

Then she took a tiny phial from a small pouch that hung at her jeweled girdle. Carefully, she dropped five drops of the bright red liquid it contained into the cup of water. Then she took the cup from the negro, and held it to Tane's lips.

"Drink, my lord," she said. "This will relieve your pain."

Tane drank it off. He felt a pleasant, tingling sensation. Then it seemed that he was drifting away on a soft, billowy cloud—and oblivion claimed him.

11. Three-Cornered Combat

When Tane awoke, the slanting rays of the morning sun were streaming in through the *mashrabiyeh* window above his diwan. His first thought was of the slender, beautiful creature who had been

beside him when he drifted into unconsciousness. She had disappeared as mysteriously as she had appeared, but the memory of her presence lingered. And Tane found that memory far more attractive than he cared to admit, even to himself. Was he falling in love? He, an engaged man, falling in love with this strange creature? Preposterous! And yet, when he compared her with Shirley Blane, his plump, vivacious, red-headed English fiancée, he realized that she drew him far more powerfully.

Why, this was madness! He must rid himself of this creature, somehow. What was this mysterious spell she had cast over him, with her languorous glances and her slim, dark beauty?

He sat up, and was instantly conscious of a stiffness across his chest. Looking down, he saw the bandages, fastened with amber-yellow gum, which she had applied. Strangely enough, the wound did not pain him. The effect of the ointment she had applied was little short of magical. The only soreness that remained was that of his throat, where the strangler's cord had come so close to finishing him.

He swung his bare feet over the edge of the diwan, then jerked the right one back with a start of surprize. It had come in contact with the stiffened fingers of a corpse. The dead strangler, evidently a Persian, lay where he had fallen, one eye staring glassily, the other a hideous, bloody mess.

Stepping gingerly over the cadaver, Tane strode across the deep-piled carpet into the *majlis*. There lay the other three assassins, Persians all, just as they had fallen. But Ali was sleeping heavily, and snoring most unmusically on his couch. Tane noticed a significant red line crossing his sharp Adam's apple, where the strangler's cord had been.

Suddenly conscious of a persistent knocking on the street door, below, Tane thought at first to awaken his servant, then decided to let the poor fellow sleep, and hurried down to answer the summons himself.

Haag Nadeem, wearing his green turban, brown cloak and pensive smile, and leaning on his Malacca stick, was at the door. Behind him stood a large, broad-shouldered negro.

"Es salam aleykum," greeted the *hagg*. "I have brought you Isa, the bowab I promised. The Touareg cook will be here in time to prepare the noonday meal."

"Thanks a lot," Tane replied. "Isa is hired, and may take charge of the door at once. Can you spare a few minutes?"

"Always, for my friend Tane Effendi."

"Good! Then come upstairs with me. I have something to show you."

Tane led the way upstairs. Ali was still snoring loudly on the diwan.

Hagg Nadeem regarded the dead men with a look of astonishment.

"Waha! All Persians!" he exclaimed. "Maksoud has struck."

One by one, he examined the cadavers.

"Two fell by the sword, and two by snake-bite," he pronounced. "Tell me about it."

Tane related his adventures of the night before, concluding with: "And now I suppose I'll be held for murder, manslaughter, or something of the sort."

"Nothing of the kind," Nadeem replied. "Let me handle this."

He went to the window, and taking a small whistle from beneath his sash, raised it to his lips and blew a shrill blast. Instantly, there was a rush of footsteps below, then the sound of many men mounting the stairway. A moment later, twelve burly native policemen hurried into the room.

Hagg Nadeem pointed to the corpses. "Take them out," he commanded.

Three men lifted each stiffening body.

"Where to, *sidi?*" asked one.

"To the rug shop of Maksoud, the Persian," Nadeem said, "and leave them there with the compliments of Tane Effendi."

Ali, awakened by the noise, sat up and looked about him in bewilderment.

"Prepare breakfast for two, Ali," Tane said, "and serve it in the *mandarah.*"

"For one, only, if you please," said Nadeem. "You'll excuse me, *effendi,* I'm sure, for I have breakfasted and some urgent business claims my attention."

"Why, of course, if you must go. But first, if you have time, I'd like you to show me that secret passageway."

"With pleasure, my friend. Follow me."

He led the way down the stairway, through the reception room and down the hallway toward the kitchen. A few feet beyond the kitchen door he paused, reached up into a small niche for utensils, and removing several pots and pans, pulled the ledge outward. A section of the wall three feet wide and seven feet high instantly swung inward, revealing a flight of narrow stone steps.

NADEEM took out his flashlight and descended the steps, Tane following closely behind him. They descended to a narrow underground passageway, which led to another flight of steps that ascended steeply. Climbing these, the *hagg* slid back the bolt of a door, and Tane saw they were in the narrow gangway between his house and the one just south of it, with easy access to the street.

"Seems as if you know all there is to know about this house," said Tane.

"No, *effendi.* I wish I did. But, for some time past, I have been watching it for reasons of my own, and have learned a few of its secrets."

They closed the door which, Tane observed, perfectly matched the surrounding wall, and returned to the reception room.

"And now, *effendi,*" said Nadeem, with his pensive smile, "I must leave you. I do not anticipate any danger for you today, but tonight, beware. Isa knows the Touareg cook, and will admit him when he arrives. He is absolutely trustworthy. *Salam aleykum.*"

"*Wa aleykum salam.*"

Tane finished his breakfast of toast, grilled lamb chops and coffee, which Ali had prepared, and lighting a cigarette, made his way back to the kitchen. Opening the door to the secret passageway, he lighted a lamp and went through to the opposite door. After a careful examination, he found and disconnected the lever which operated the bolt from the outside. Then he returned to the door which led into the kitchen. But he could find no way of fastening it so that it could not be opened from the stairway; so he sent Ali out for some bolts, lumber and tools with which he was able to fasten it, so that nothing short of a battering-ram could move it.

He had just finished, and was contemplating the result of his labors, when a strange figure shuffled into the kitchen. The newcomer was swathed in a flowing burnoose and head-cloth of many folds, and his features were covered by a blue veil.

"I am Akhamouk, the cook, sent by Hagg Nadeem," he said in Arabic, his voice harsh and rasping. "You are Tane Effendi?"

"Yes."

"I trust that your servant finds favor in your sight."

"As much of you as is visible," Tane replied. "You have honest eyes and capable-looking hands. But the main consideration is that the *hagg* recommended you. You're hired."

"Allah's bounty and his blessing upon you, *sidi,*" rasped the veiled man, and he immediately set to work among the pots and pans.

Tane returned to the reception room and the efficient Ali promptly brought him a narghile, with charcoal glowing. As he puffed fragrant wisps of smoke from the purring, bubbling pipe, the American ruminated on the odd and extremely dangerous situation in which he found himself. Despite her strange appearances and disappearances, despite even the tiny scales he had seen on her shapely body, he could not bring himself to believe that the lovely creature who had been weaving in and out of the strange fabric of his experiences, was other than a real flesh-and-blood human like himself. Suddenly, he realized that this was what he *wanted* to believe, and that his attitude was far from impersonal and scientific. The facts, weigh them as he would, pointed to the Lamia theory. And a true scientist must find according to the facts, regardless of how preposterous the conclusion might seem. It was obvious that Doctor Schneider and Maksoud the Persian both believed in the reality of the Lamia. And Shaykh Ibrahim believed so devoutly and wanted her so intensely that he had given up his life in an effort to possess her.

Then there was Hagg Nadeem, the mystic, the inscrutable. Where did he fit into this outré jigsaw puzzle? He had admitted, just this morning, that he had been watching the house of Doctor Schneider for some time. Why? Had he, also, been interested in gaining possession of the Lamia?

TANE finished his narghile and prowled about the house, examining the rare fabrics and furnishings, every one of which was a valuable collector's piece in excellent condition.

Akhamouk cooked an excellent lunch, which Tane barely touched. Then he returned to a fresh narghile to ponder, and to make plans against the ominous coming of the night.

Isa, the new bowab, was armed with a heavy simitar and dagger. The Touareg, also, had a simitar and a pair of daggers. And he and Ali had their yatagans. Tane wore his, belted at his waist, and as evening approached, ordered the Syrian to do the same.

Dinner over, Tane again sought the solace of the water-pipe, and innumerable tiny cups of sirupy coffee. He resolved that this night he would remain awake. Tomorrow there would be time enough for sleep—if for him there was to be a tomorrow.

Midnight came without incident. Lighting a lamp, Tane made the rounds. Isa was sleeping on his mattress behind the street door. The Touareg was slumbering on the diwan in his small room just off the kitchen. And Ali, lying on his couch in the *majlis,* twitched in his sleep and muttered incoherently of *jinn* and houris.

Returning to the reception room, Tane refilled his pipe, and applying the charcoal, seated himself once more on the diwan. He had just gotten the tobacco well alight when he heard the sound of footsteps in the courtyard. Then the door swung open, and in waddled a rotund figure in burnoose and head-cloth, a corner of the latter drawn across the face. Despite the fact that the features were concealed, Tane recognized the figure and walk of Doctor Schneider.

The doctor advanced to the middle of the floor and stopped. Behind him marched a score of Bedouins, the lamplight glinting on the naked blades in their hands.

For a moment Tane was so astounded he was unable to speak. Then he gained the mastery of his voice.

"Good evening, *Herr Doktor,*" he said, pleasantly. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

"So! You know me, eh? Vell, it don't matter, anyvay. You von't live long to do any talking." Throwing back the corner of his head-cloth, he glared down at the American. The Bedouins advanced menacingly, but the doctor bade them halt.

"Just what is this all about, doctor?" Tane asked.

"You should ask! You robber! You snake-in-the-grass! You stole Lamia from me—me who vorked und slaved und fought to bring her here—und you ask vot it is all about! I haff brought the scroll und the magic candles, und if you do not summon her und turn her over to me, my men vill cut you into small pieces!"

"Not so fast, traitor!"

Tane looked up in astonishment, at the sound of a strange voice. Maksoud, the hawk-nosed Persian, was just entering the reception room through the door used by the doctor and his Bedouins. And behind Maksoud there trooped a score of his countrymen, stout fellows all, with simitars in their hands.

Doctor Schneider started perceptibly, then looked around.

"Vell, Maksoud. Vot the devil do you vant?"

"O dog, and son of a dog, you know full well what I want and what I will have! You purchased my interest in certain other things, and all that is settled between us. But the Lamia was half mine, and for my interest in her you paid me nothing. In the dead of night, you stole away from our desert camp with her, and hired the accursed Shaykh Ibrahim, may Allah not accept him, to bring her here in a funeral procession."

"Vait! Dot vos a ruse to fool the bolice. I vould have divided mit you, later."

"After you had made her yours? *Subhanullah!* I know you too well for that!"

"Vell. Vat about you? Stole into mein house, broke mein head, und tried to raise her, yourself, before this American interfered, und cheated both of us."

"It is that, and one other score I have come to settle with the American," said Maksoud. "If he does not make me Lord of the Lamia, then will my men roast him in his own oven and feed his flesh to the jackals. As for you, depart in peace, leaving me this house, these furnishings and *her,* and I will consider the score settled between us."

"Not on your life, Maksoud. It is you who vill leave, not I. Come back tomorrow, und I vill see that the Lamia makes you more vealthy than the shah."

"Or, perhaps, that she sends me to paradise. No, traitor, I do not trust you. But if you will leave now, peaceably, I will swear by the triple oath——"

"Vot do I care for your triple oaths? Vy should I trust you, who do not trust me?"

"Well, then we must fight. There is no other way."

The two factions drew off on opposite sides of the room.

Maksoud issued a swift order to his men in Persian. Two of them sprang for Tane. The rest charged the doctor and his Bedouins.

Whipping out his yatagan, Tane stepped up on the diwan with his back to the wall, and awaited the attack.

Before he crossed blades with his two assailants, he was surprized to see the doctor draw his own simitar and leap into the fray. A moment later, he and Maksoud were engaged in a deadly combat, while the blades of their men clashed around them, mingled with shouts, groans, and cries of: "Persian pigs who pray without washing! Heretics! Defilers!" from the Bedouins. And: "Horse-

thieves and robbers! Schismatics! Scum of the desert!" from the Persians.

But Tane had no time to view the general mêlée, for he found himself engaged with two skilled swordsmen, either of whom would have made a formidable antagonist for him alone.

12. *The Cache*

TANE managed to parry the first blow of the swordsman on his right, and counter with a return cut that gashed the fellow's face. But in doing so, he was forced to catch the weapon of his other antagonist on a cushion he had snatched up from the diwan, and it proved but a poor shield. For though it softened the blow, the blade cut through and bit into the bone of his left arm so that it dangled uselessly.

Another moment and he must have succumbed, had it not been that, at this instant, a blue-veiled figure dashed in from the hallway and engaged one of his opponents. It was Akhamouk, the Touareg cook, who, fighting with simitar and dagger, instantly made the Persian on the right give ground.

Tane recovered and went after his remaining opponent, hammer and tongs. Then, at a shout from Maksoud, another Persian separated himself from the mêlée, and once more Tane found himself between two assailants. But this time it was Ali who dashed to his rescue, suddenly popping out from behind the curtains that concealed the stairway. After that, the American quickly dropped his man with a blow that split the skull.

During a moment's breathing-space, Tane saw that more than half of the doctor's Bedouins were on the floor, and the others were rapidly giving ground before the superior ability of the fierce Persian swordsmen. These desert men were doughty fighters when mounted, but here, on foot, the Persian warriors had them at a disadvantage because they were out of their element.

There was another sharp command from Maksoud, and four more of his men left the general scrimmage to attack Tane, Ali and Akhamouk.

Ali was cursing as he fought, but the Touareg was taunting his foes—laughing, jesting as he slashed and parried. Soon but a small handful of the Bedouins remained. In the midst of them stood the doctor, bleeding from half a dozen wounds, and still striving to reach his opponent, Maksoud, with his blade, while the latter's men hemmed them in on all sides.

Suddenly Tane heard the shrill sound of a whistle beside him—a whistle that sounded strangely familiar. It seemed to issue from beneath the blue veil worn by the Touareg.

At the sound of that blast, Isa, the huge negro bowab, charged into the room swinging his long simitar. And behind him came a horde of native soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonets.

At sight of the rifles in the hands of the soldiers, the contestants instantly threw down their weapons and raised their hands in surrender.

Then, to Tane's astonishment, the Touareg tore off his veil, shed his huge burnoose and cumbrous head-cloth, and stood revealed, a slender, suave, smiling figure in a brown burnoose and green turban.

"Hagg Nadeem!" exclaimed Tane.

An officer stepped up before the *hagg* and saluted respectfully.

"Place those brawlers under arrest," ordered Nadeem. "See to the wounded, and carry the dead out into the courtyard."

He turned to Tane. "Come, *effendi*. You have a pretty bad arm. Let's go to

the bathroom and I'll bind it up for you. I have some slight medical skill."

"Slight, did you say? You are modest. I understand you have the right to place an M. D. after your name. But whether it's true or not, I could stand some attention. The thing is beginning to throb like the very devil."

THE efficient Ali placed a lamp for them in the bathroom and departed to the kitchen to brew coffee.

"You certainly fooled me neatly," said Tane, when Nadeem was putting the final touches to his bandaged arm. "Why, you looked more like a Touareg than a Touareg does."

"One of my favorite disguises," smiled the *hagg*. "I pride myself on carrying it off rather well. But I have not fooled you half so badly as this Doctor Schneider has fooled me."

"Fooled you? What do you mean?"

"If I could only find that mummy-case!"

"Why, it must have been carried off by the *'jinn,'* as Ali called them, when they brought in the furnishings and tore out the partition."

"No, it wasn't. I happened to know that the coffin they carried out of the alcove contained the badly defunct corpse of Wardan, the bowab, and nothing else worth mentioning. The doctor evidently exchanged the corpse for the mummy-case while I was taking you to my house."

"You know all this? How?"

"I learn many things in one way and another."

Tane looked curiously at this slender, mysterious man, who knew so much and told so little.

"Very well, if it's a secret," he said. "Let's go up into the *majlis* for pipes and coffee. The reception room is a mess."

"I have no time for smoking and chatting now. I must search."

"For what?"

"For that mummy-case. It is concealed somewhere in this house. Of that I am positive. And in that place of concealment I expect to find something of the utmost importance to me."

"Wait! Hold everything! I have an idea." Tane suddenly fished in his pocket, and bringing out the gilded and lacquered sliver he had found in the bathroom two days before, handed it to the *hagg*.

Nadeem examined it intently for a moment. "Where did you find this?" he asked, excitedly.

"I picked it up right where you are standing, the day after I enjoyed your hospitality."

"Wallah! So the doctor brought it here. Then the entrance to the secret hiding-place that has eluded me for so long must be in this very room." Swiftly, excitedly, he began a detailed examination of every part of the bathroom. Presently he cried out triumphantly and pointed to a tiny bit of red lacquer adhering to the edge of the tiles where they met the bottom of the built-in tub.

"It's there, *effendi,"* he shouted. "There beneath the tub. Now to discover the secret of the mechanism."

He examined the faucets, turned them, and water came forth. He closed them again and pulled on them, but nothing happened. Then his eye fell on the shower, fixed to the ceiling overhead. Stepping up on the edge of the tub, he grasped the shower and pulled. Instantly the tub began to rise.

Leaping to the tiles, Nadeem waited while the tub continued to travel upward until it stood about five feet above the floor on four thick iron pipes—evidently raised by hydraulic pressure. Beneath it,

a flight of stone steps led downward into the darkness.

Snatching the lamp, Nadeem plunged down the steps, Tane at his heels. They found themselves in a large, square storeroom, stacked high with bales and boxes.

In the center of the room stood the mummy-case. But Nadeem did not even notice it. Instead, he rushed to one of the boxes, pried off the lid with his dagger, and reached inside. He pulled out a packet and tore it open, spilling part of its contents of dried leaves.

"What the devil!" asked Tane, bewildered.

"Hashish!" exclaimed Nadeem excitedly. "Bales of it! Boxes of it! Several tons of it, at the very least! The greatest hashish cache ever discovered by the secret police of any nation! And for this discovery and the apprehension of the smugglers, my friend, I owe much to you. But come, there is yet one thing to be done—one most important thing."

"What is that?" Tane asked.

"I must rid you of Lamia—send her back to that long sleep from which you took her when you read the ancient scroll by the light of the two magic candles. I should destroy her, perhaps, for she is a terrible creature, a thing of evil, and so far as I can learn, the last of her kind to retain the corporeal link which makes her physical manifestation to mankind possible. But she has served my purpose well, and it would be base ingratitude on my part to destroy that last link for her."

"But suppose I don't want to be rid of her," said Tane.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"You mean you are in love with her?"

"I love her more than life itself—more than anyone or anything on this earth."

"Ah! That complicates the matter." Nadeem lighted one of his long cigarettes and puffed reflectively for a moment. "But are you not engaged to marry a charming English girl, a Miss Shirley Mason?"

"I will break the engagement."

"You are mad. Yet, after all, I might have expected this—the fatal charm of the Lamia is irresistible to mortal man, save to those few adepts and philosophers who really understand her."

"Do you?"

"Yes, for I am both adept and philosopher."

"Then, in God's name, tell me! Who is she? What is she?"

"It were best," said Hagg Nadeem, "that I show you. I have the power to destroy her corporeal existence, but not to send her back to her long sleep unharmed. Only you can do that, for you are her lord. She sleeps now, as her labors have been arduous and her awakening was but recent."

13. Unweaving the Rainbow

NADEEM raised the lid of the mummy-case with one hand, and held the lamp so that it lighted the interior.

"Look," he said.

Tane peered inside, and saw a snake which looked exactly like the one he had first seen in the same case. It seemed to be in a torpor, its long scaly body coiled limply, its head resting inside the rim of the brilliant white-plumed diadem which Lamia had worn.

Nadeem lowered the lid once more and set the lamp on a packing-case.

"She sleeps," he said, "but she *knows*. Very shortly now, she will materialize and attempt to defeat my plans. For corporeal life is very sweet to her, and she has not had a human lover for three thousand years, though at her last awakening she loved and destroyed many."

"I don't care who she is or what she is—human, reptile or demon—or whether she has had a million lovers and killed them all," said Tane vehemently. "I love her."

Nadeem's eyes suddenly flashed like sword-points.

"Subhanullah!" he exclaimed. "There is none so blind as a fool in love. Well then, I'll test the integrity of your affection. Do you love her enough to keep her from being destroyed?"

"Of course."

"Very well. Then understand this. Either you will send her back to her long sleep, or I will destroy her utterly."

He paused suddenly and looked at the mummy-case. Little scuffling noises were coming from inside it.

"We must work fast!" he exclaimed.

Hurriedly he dragged two packing-boxes to positions at the head and foot of the coffin. Then he drew two candles from his pockets, and Tane recognized that they were identical in size, shape and color, with the ones he had first seen in the niche. After lighting the candles, the *hagg* drew a ring from his pocket—a massive ring of yellow gold in which was mounted a tremendous ruby that flashed like fire in the artificial light. And Tane saw that on the face of the ruby was engraved a great six-pointed star formed from two equilateral triangles, while in the central, six-sided space was a word written in characters which he, linguist and archeologist though he was, could not decipher.

The rustlings in the casket grew louder, there were some thumping sounds, and once Tane thought he heard a suppressed moan.

Nadeem now jerked a flexible golden scroll from beneath his garments and handed it to Tane.

"After I order her back," he said, "you must read this. If you do so, she will only return to her long sleep. And if you do not, I will annihilate her utterly, for I have the power, here." He tapped the great ruby on his finger significantly.

Tane unrolled the scroll and glanced at it.

"Read it over now, and you will see that although it is a command, it is gently and politely worded."

Tane read:

"Hent-a nefer Lamia suten net sat neter nefer Re un heqt nebt taui Pilatre——"

He was interrupted by a sound from the mummy-case, as the lid suddenly heaved upward and crashed to the floor. Nadeem snatched the scroll from his hands as he looked toward the casket above the lid of which two dimpled white arms projected.

Tane stared, fascinated, as the nodding white plumes, the jeweled diadem, and then the lovely head and shoulders of Lamia appeared above the rim. She yawned prettily, stretched, and stood up, her clinging diaphanous garment revealing every ravishing charm of her slender, supple figure.

With pantherish grace, she stepped out of the casket, and pausing for a moment, smiled at Tane, completely ignoring the presence of the *hagg*.

And Tane, as he looked into those twin pools of loveliness, in whose depths were mirrored the sum total of all his desires and all his yearnings, forgot the presence of the Egyptian.

She did not advance, but stood there with arms held out to him, red lips tremulous, eyes starry, snowy bosom heaving.

"Take me, my lord," she pleaded. "Save me—keep me for yourself—and I will be your slave, always."

Mechanically, haltingly, yet drawn by

a power which he could not resist, Tane stepped forward like a sleep-walker. And dimly, as in some elusive dream, he heard the voice of the *hagg:*

"I will permit you one minute of farewell, Tane Effendi. No more."

Tane stood before her now, looking down into those love-lit eyes.

"Lamia, beloved!" he cried, and the cry was half a sob. Then he caught her to him, and was aware of a fiery pleasure in the touch of her slender body, her small firm breasts and the soft arms that clung around his neck. Eagerly he claimed her upturned lips, and found in them a passionate response that sent rivulets of fire surging through his veins and made him oblivious to all else.

For but a moment he was permitted to taste a bliss which had been vouchsafed to no other man of his day, but in that single moment he knew he had lived through an eternity of sweet passion. Then the voice of Nadeem broke sharply through to his consciousness.

"Enough, *effendi.* Release her if you would not have her destroyed in your arms."

Tane let her go and stepped back, then gasped in amazement at sight of the change which had suddenly taken place in the lovely apparition. She was looking at Hagg Nadeem, and the eyes that had been starry with love now gleamed with venomous hatred, the hands that had been gentle and caressing were drawn up like rending claws, and the white teeth were bared in a bestial snarl.

"Away, meddling magician!" she shrieked, and her voice broke like that of a hag. "Away, or you will die as died the others who opposed my will in ages past! Think you that you can frighten me with your puny delving into the black arts? You and your talisman-hawking brethren have no power over such as I."

"That is true," replied Hagg Nadeem, "but there is One who has power over all creatures, who has been called by many names, but whose real name is engraved on this ring which I wear."

He suddenly extended his right hand, exposing the great ruby on his finger. At sight of it Lamia paled, drew back trembling with fear.

"You can read it as well as I," he continued. "Would you like to hear it pronounced by an adept?"

She clapped her hands over her eyes as if to shut out the brilliance of that great ruby.

"No! *No!*" she whimpered.

"I thought not," he replied, "for this is the seal ring of Sulayman Baalshem, Lord of the Name, the ring which gave him power over the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, over men and angels and devils and *jinn,* and even over such creatures as you."

"What do you want me to do?" she moaned.

"A feeling of gratitude has prompted me to withhold your destruction," he said; "so I am permitting your lord to send you back to your long sleep, unharmed."

He handed the scroll to Tane. "Read, *effendi,*" he directed.

TANE took the scroll and opened it, glancing for a moment at the ancient characters. Then he read slowly, sonorously, in the language of ancient Egypt:

"Lamia, lovely slave of mine, daughter of the beautiful god Re, and of Pilatre, Princess of the Two Lands, I, your lord who bade you awaken, now bid you sleep once more. And by the power of the charm of Osiris, King of the Dead, conceived of the Lord of the Two Truths and known only to a chosen few, you will

sleep on for ever, unless or until I, or another of my enlightenment, shall once more bid you awaken."

As he glanced up from his reading he was amazed to see that a change was already taking place in the slender figure before him. The tiny scales which he had once before noted on her white skin were rapidly enlarging. Her head was changing form, flattening above, elongating in front, and her arms and legs were shrinking. She took the diadem from her head and deposited it in the casket. Hagg Nadeem removed a small roll of linen bandage from a pocket and holding one end, tossed it to her so that it unrolled into a thin streamer.

"Your cerements," he said.

She caught it in a rapidly shrinking hand, and suddenly rising on tiptoe like a ballet dancer, began whirling so rapidly that the long bandage formed a series of spiral loops around her, while her figure inside it was but a blur of motion.

"Farewell, dear lord," she called, her voice sunken to a hissing whisper. "You know it not, but I loved you before, love you still, and will love you through all eternity."

She was standing in the center of the mummy-case now, whirling with the speed of a spinning top. Swiftly the folds of the encircling linen drew closer together, until they formed a narrow, upright cylinder about two inches in diameter and four feet in height. Tane was reminded of a caterpillar spinning its cocoon. And like an inert cocoon, the cylinder presently ceased its whirling and dropped below the casket rim.

Tane sprang forward and saw the mummied serpent just as he had seen it when he had first opened the mummy-case, its head resting on the inner rim of the diadem. He spoke huskily.

"What are you going to do with her, *hagg*?"

"Tomorrow," replied Nadeem, "I will load her upon the back of a camel and return her to her secret tomb in the Libyan Desert."

"But what if someone else should find her—some archeologist, for instance?"

"Only two men besides myself know the location of her tomb," said the *hagg*, "and these two will spend the rest of their natural lives behind prison bars."

"You mean Doctor Schneider and Maksoud the Persian?"

"Precisely. For the past ten years I have been trailing the members of the biggest hashish syndicate this country has ever seen. Oh, I have caught the small fry, time and again. But I was never able to reach the principals. And until just recently I did not know who they were.

"Never mind how, but some time ago I discovered that this vast syndicate was controlled by two supposedly respectable individuals—Doctor Schneider the archeologist, and Maksoud the Persian rug-dealer. I learned that these two men were close friends, closer than Damon and Pythias, and that they trusted each other, but no one else.

"Time and again I caught one or another of their subordinates with the deadly drug, and found ways to make them talk. But these petty criminals did not even know who paid them. I *knew*, but I had no legal proof. And I soon saw that unless I could find some means of separating these two fast friends—of making them hate each other—I should probably never be able to convict them or break up their illicit syndicate.

"I racked my brain for a plan, and it was while I was going through the ancient documents left me by my illustrious forebears that I hit upon a plan. Among the papyrus scrolls was one which told of

the burial-place of the Lamia and the scroll which would awaken her. I knew that if these two fast friends were given something they could not divide it was inevitable that they should quarrel. The Lamia, more desirable than all the gold that either could amass, was something they could not divide.

"I MADE a copy of the scroll on some ancient blank papyrus and contrived to have it brought to the attention of the two friends when they were together, so there was no chance of either concealing the secret from the other. They took the Lamia from her ancient tomb, quarreled as I had foreseen, and as a result of that quarrel, Doctor Schneider bought out Maksoud's half-interest in the hashish syndicate, but beggared himself in paying for it.

"Of course he had this tremendous cache of the drug here, but my men were watching this place so closely that he did not dare attempt to dispose of any great quantity of it. In the meantime, he had stolen away from the desert camp with the mummy-case, and devised the ruse with which you are familiar for bringing it here.

"But he needed money to pay for the false funeral and other current expenses, and in leasing this house to you, accomplished the double purpose of obtaining the gold and directing suspicion away from his huge store of hashish, which, through a number of secret passageways known to him, he had the means of reaching at any time it pleased him to do so."

"Then there are passageways other than the one you showed me?"

"The house is honeycombed with them. I knew all the old ones because it happened that the house was once the property of my family, and the old plans came into my hands. For instance, I can tell you that tonight the doctor and the Persian, finding the passageway through the kitchen blocked, came in through another which leads underground from one of their hiding-places and comes up under the fountain in the courtyard, which can be swung to one side by means of a pivot. But the bathroom was an innovation installed by the doctor. I should have been wise enough to look there first of all, but perhaps it was too obvious. Of course your coming on the scene was not within my calculations at all, but you worked along with me so well that it did not upset them. Had either the doctor or Maksoud become Lord of the Lamia, I should have been compelled to destroy her. But as things turned out, I am grateful both to you and her, and have refrained."

"God knows it was bad enough to have to send her back to that serpentine form," said Tane with a touch of bitterness, for every cell in his body still yearned for the lovely creature he had held in his arms.

"Come, come, my friend, you must be a true philosopher. You have escaped a great evil that would have destroyed your very soul."

"I can't help feeling that it would have been worth it," Tane retorted. "Besides, I'm afraid I am more of a poet than a philosopher, for I hold with Keats:

> "Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomèd mine—
> Unweave a rainbow——

"I can't recall the rest of it, but let that suffice—for you have unwoven my rainbow."

Hagg Nadeem smiled pensively, and reached for a cigarette.

"Perhaps some day I shall weave you another," he said.

[THE END]

The Flower-Women

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A bizarre fantasy, about a race of vampiric flowers and an alien sorcerer on a far world warmed by three suns

"ATHLÉ," said Maal Dweb, "I suffer from the frightful curse of omnipotence. In all Xiccarph, and in the five outer planets of the triple suns, there is no one, there is nothing, to dispute my dominion. Therefore my ennui has become intolerable."

The girlish eyes of Athlé regarded the enchanter with a gaze of undying astonishment, which, however, was not due to his strange avowal. She was the last of the fifty-one women that Maal Dweb had turned into statues in order to preserve their frail, corruptible beauty from the worm-like gnawing of time. Since, through a laudable desire to avoid monotony, he had resolved never to repeat again this particular sorcery, the magician had cherished Athlé with the affection which an artist feels for the final masterpiece of a series. He had placed her on a little dais, beside the ivory chair in his chamber of meditation. Often he addressed to her his queries or monologues; and the fact that she did not reply or even hear was to him a signal and unfailing recommendation.

"There is but one remedy for this boredom of mine," he went on—"the abnegation, at least for a while, of that all too certain power from which it springs. Therefore, I, Maal Dweb, the ruler of six worlds and all their moons, shall go forth alone, unheralded, and without other equipment than that which any fledgling sorcerer might possess. In this way, perhaps I shall recover the lost charm of incertitude, the foregone enchantment of peril. Adventures that I have not foreseen will be mine, and the future will wear the alluring veil of the mysterious. It remains, however, to select the field of my adventurings."

Maal Dweb arose from his curiously carven chair and waved back the four automatons of iron, having the likeness of armed men, that sprang to attend him. He passed along the halls of his palace, where painted hangings told in vermilion and purple the dread legends of his power. Through ebon valves that opened noiselessly at the uttering of a high-pitched word, he entered the chamber in which was his planetarium.

The room was walled, floored and vaulted with a dark crystal, full of tiny, numberless fires, that gave the illusion of unbounded space with all its stars. In midair, without chains or other palpable support, there hung an array of various globes that represented the three suns, the six planets and thirteen moons of the system ruled by Maal Dweb. The miniature suns, amber, emerald and carmine, bathed their intricately circling worlds with an illumination that reproduced at all times the diurnal conditions of the system itself; and the pigmy satellites maintained always their corresponding orbits and relative positions.

The sorcerer went forward, walking as if on some unfathomable gulf of night, with stars and galaxies beneath him. The poising worlds were level with his shoulders as he passed among them. Disregarding the globes that corresponded to

"The Ispazars hurled themselves toward him."

Mornoth, Xiccarph, Ulassa, Nouph and Rhul, he came to Votalp, the outermost, which was then in aphelion on the farther side of the room.

Votalp, a large and moonless world, revolved imperceptibly as he studied it. For one hemisphere, he saw, the yellow sun was at that time in total eclipse behind the sun of carmine; but in spite of this, and its greater distance from the solar triad, Votalp was lit with sufficient clearness. It was mottled with strange hues like a great cloudy opal; and the mottlings were microcosmic oceans, isles, mountains, jungles and deserts. Fantastic sceneries leapt into momentary salience, taking on the definitude and perspective of actual landscapes, and then faded back amid the iridescent blur. Glimpses of teeming, multifarious life, incredible tableaux, monstrous happenings, were beheld by Maal Dweb as he looked down like some celestial spy.

It seemed, however, that he found lit-

tle to divert or inveigle him in these outré doings and exotic wonders. Vision after vision rose before him, summoned and dismissed at will, as if he were turning the pages of a familiar volume. The wars of gigantic wyverns, the matings of half-vegetable monsters, the queer algæ that had filled a certain ocean with their living and moving labyrinths, the remarkable spawn of certain polar glaciers: all these elicited no gleam or sparkle in his dulled eyes of blackish emerald.

At length, on that portion of the planet which was turning slowly into the double dawn from its moonless night, he perceived an occurrence that drew and held his attention. For the first time, he began to calculate the precise latitude and longitude of the surrounding milieu.

"There," he said to himself, "is a situation not without interest. In fact, the whole affair is quaint and curious enough to warrant my intervention. I shall visit Votalp."

He withdrew from the planetarium and made a few preparations for his meditated journey. Having changed his robe of magisterial sable and scarlet for a hodden mantle, and having removed from his person every charm and talisman, with the exception of two phylacteries acquired during his novitiate, he went forth into the garden of his mountain-builded palace. He left no instructions with the many retainers who served him: for these retainers were automatons of iron and brass, who would fulfill their various duties without injunction till he returned.

TRAVERSING the curious labyrinth which he alone could solve, he came to the verge of the sheer mesa, where python-like lianas drooped into space, and metallic palms deployed their armaments of foliage against the far-flung horizons of the world Xiccarph. Empires and cities, lying supine beneath his magical dominion, were unrolled before him; but, giving them hardly a glance, he walked along the estrade of black marble at the very brink, till he reached a narrow promontory around which there hung at all times a deep and hueless cloud, obscuring the prospect of the lands below and beyond.

The secret of this cloud, affording access to multiple dimensions and deeply folded realms of space conterminous with far worlds, was known only to Maal Dweb. He had built a silver drawbridge on the promontory; and by lowering its airy span into the cloud, he could pass at will to the farther zones of Xiccarph, or could cross the very void between the planets.

Now, after making certain highly recondite calculations, he manipulated the machinery of the light drawbridge so that its other end would fall upon the particular terrain that he desired to visit in Votalp. Then, assuring himself that his calculations and adjustments were flawless, he followed the silver span into the dim, bewildering chaos of the cloud. Here, as he groped in a gray blindness, it seemed that his body and members were drawn out over infinite gulfs, and were bent through impossible angles. A single misstep would have plunged him into spatial regions from which all his cunning sorcery could have contrived no manner of return or release; but he had often trod these hidden ways, and he did not lose his equilibrium. The transit appeared to involve whole centuries of time; but finally he emerged from the cloud and came to the farther end of the drawbridge.

Before him was the scene that had lured his interest in Votalp. It was a semi-tropic valley, level and open in the foreground, and rising steeply at the other

extreme, with all its multiform fantasies of vegetation, toward the cliffs and chasms of sable mountains horned with blood-red stone. The time was still early dawn; but the amber sun, freeing itself slowly from the occultation of the sun of carmine, had begun to lighten the hues and shadows of the valley with strange copper and orange. The emerald sun was still below the horizon.

The terminus of the bridge had fallen on a mossy knoll, behind which the hueless cloud had gathered, even as about the promontory in Xiccarph. Maal Dweb descended the knoll, feeling no concern whatever for the bridge. It would remain as he had left it, till the time of his return; and if, in the interim, any creatures from Votalp should cross the gulf and invade his mountain citadel, they would meet a fearful doom in the snares and windings of the labyrinth; or, failing this, would be exterminated by his iron servitors.

As he went down the knoll into the valley, the enchanter heard an eery, plaintive singing, like that of sirens who bewail some irremediable misfortune. The singing came from a sisterhood of unusual creatures, half woman and half flower, that grew in the valley bottom beside a sleepy stream of purple water. There were several scores of these lovely and charming monsters, whose feminine bodies of pink and pearl reclined amid the vermilion velvet couches of billowing petals to which they were attached. These petals were borne on mattress-like leaves and heavy, short, well-rooted stems. The flowers were disposed in irregular circles, clustering thickly toward the center, and with open intervals in the outer rows.

Maal Dweb approached the flower-women with a certain caution; for he knew that they were vampires. Their arms ended in long tendrils, pale as ivory, swifter and more supple than the coils of darting serpents, with which they were wont to secure the unwary victims drawn by their singing. Of course, knowing in his wisdom the inexorable laws of nature, he felt no disapproval of such vampirism; but, on the other hand, he did not care to be its object.

He circled about the strange family at a little distance, his movements hidden from their observation by boulders overgrown with tall, luxuriant lichens of red and yellow. Soon he neared the straggling outer line of plants that were upstream from the knoll on which he had landed; and here, in confirmation of the vision beheld on the mimic world in his planetarium, he found that the turf was upheaved and broken where five of the blossoms, growing apart from their companions, had been disrooted and removed bodily. He had seen in his vision the rape of the fifth flower, and he knew that the others were now lamenting her.

SUDDENLY, as if they had forgotten their sorrow, the wailing of the flower-women turned to a wild and sweet and voluptuous singing, like that of the Lorelei. By this token, the enchanter knew that his presence had been detected. Inured though he was to such bewitchments, he found himself far from insensible to the perilous luring of the voices. Contrary to his intention, forgetful of the danger, he emerged from the lee of the lichen-crested rocks. By insidious degrees, the melody fired his blood with a strange intoxication, it sang in his brain like some bewildering wine. Step by step, with a temporary loss of prudence for which, later, he was quite unable to account, he approached the blossoms.

Now, pausing at an interval that he deemed safe in his bemusement, he beheld plainly the half-human features of

the vampires, leaning toward him with fantastic invitation. Their weirdly slanted eyes, like oblong opals of dew and venom, the snaky coiling of their bronze-green hair, the bright, baneful scarlet of their lips, that thirsted subtly even as they sang, awoke within him the knowledge of his peril. Too late, he sought to defy the captiously woven spell. Unwinding with a movement swift as light, the long pale tendrils of one of the creatures wrapped him round, and he was drawn, resisting vainly, toward her couch.

At the moment of his capture, the whole sisterhood had ceased their singing. They began to utter little cries of triumph, shrill and sibilant. Murmurs of expectation, like the purrings of hungry flame, arose from the nearest, who hoped to share in the good fortune of the sorcerer's captress.

Maal Dweb, however, was now able to utilize his faculties. Without alarm or fear, he contemplated the lovely monster, who had drawn him to the verge of her velvet bed, and was fawning upon him with sinisterly parted lips.

Using a somewhat primary power of divination, he apprised himself of certain matters concerning the vampire. Having learnt the true, occult name which this creature shared with all others of her kind, he then spoke the name aloud in a firm but gentle tone; and winning thus, by an elemental law of magic, the power of mastery over his captress and her sisters, he felt the instant relaxation of the tendrils. The flower-woman, with fear and wonder in her strange eyes, drew back like a startled lamia; but Maal Dweb, employing the half-articulate sounds of her own language, began to soothe and reassure her. In a little while he was on friendly terms with the whole sisterhood. These simple and naïve beings forgot their vampiric intentions, their surprize and wonderment, and seemed to accept the magician very much as they accepted the three suns and the meteoric conditions of the planet Votalp.

Conversing with them, he soon verified the information obtained through the mimic globe. As a rule their emotions and memories were short-lived, their nature being closer to that of plants or animals than of humankind; but the loss of five sisters, occurring on successive mornings, had filled them with grief and terror that they could not forget. The missing flowers had been carried away bodily. The depredators were certain reptilian beings, colossal in size and winged like pterodactyls, who came down from their new-built citadel among the mountains at the valley's upper extreme. These beings, known as the Ispazars, seven in number, had become formidable sorcerers and had developed an intellection beyond that of their kind, together with many esoteric faculties. Preserving the cold and evilly cryptic nature of reptiles, they had made themselves the masters of an abhuman science. But, until the present, Maal Dweb had ignored them and had not thought it worth while to interfere with their evolution.

Now, through an errant whim, in his search for adventure, he had decided to pit himself against the Ispazars, employing no other weapons of sorcery than his own wit and will, his remembered learning, his clairvoyance, and the two simple amulets that he wore on his person.

"Be comforted," he said to the flower-women, "for verily I shall deal with these miscreants in a fitting manner."

At this, they broke into a shrill babble, repeating tales that the bird-people of the valley had told them regarding the fortress of the Ispazars, whose walls rose sheerly from a hidden peak unscaled by man, and were void of portal or window

save in the highmost ramparts, where the flying reptiles went in and out. And they told him other tales, concerning the ferocity and cruelty of the Ispazars. . . .

Smiling as if at the chatter of children, he diverted their thoughts to other matters, and told them many stories of odd and curious marvels, and queer happenings in alien worlds. In the meanwhile he perfected his plan for obtaining entrance to the citadel of the reptilian wizards.

THE day went by in such divertisements; and one by one the three suns of the system fell beyond the valley's rim. The flower-women grew attentive, they began to nod and drowse in the richly darkening twilight; and Maal Dweb proceeded with certain preparations that formed an essential part of his scheme.

Through his power of second-sight, he had determined the identity of the victim whom the reptiles would carry away in their next raid on the morrow. This creature, as it happened, was the one who had sought to ensnare him. Like the others, she was now preparing to fold herself for the night in her voluminous couch of petals. Confiding part of his plan to her, Maal Dweb manipulated in a singular fashion one of the amulets which he wore, and by virtue of this manipulation, reduced himself to the proportions of a pigmy. In this state, with the assistance of the drowsy siren, he was able to conceal himself in a hollow space among the petals; and thus embowered, like a bee in a rose he slept securely through the short, moonless night of Votalp.

The dawn awakened him, glowing as if through lucent curtains of ruby and purple. He heard the flower-women murmuring sleepily to one another as they opened their blossoms to the early suns. Their murmurs, however, soon changed into shrill cries of agitation and fear; and above the cries, there came a vibrant drumming as of great dragon-wings. He peered from his hiding-place and saw in the double dawn the descent of the Ispazars, from whose webbed vans a darkness fell on the valley. Nearer they drew, and he saw their cold and scarlet eyes beneath scaly brows, their long, undulant bodies, their lizard limbs and prehensile claws; and he heard the deep, articulate hissing of their voices. Then the petals closed about him blindly, shuddering and constrictive, as the flower-woman recoiled from the swooping monsters. All was confusion, terror, tumult; but he knew, from his observation of the previous rape, that two of the Ispazars had encircled the flower's stem with their python-like tails, and were pulling it from the ground as a human sorcerer might pull a mandrake plant.

He felt the convulsive agony of the disrooted blossom, he heard the lamentable shrieking of her sisters. Then there came a heavier beating of the drum-loud wings, and the feeling of giddy ascension and flight.

Through all this, Maal Dweb maintained the utmost presence of mind; and he did not betray himself to the Ispazars. After many minutes, there was a slackening of the headlong flight, and he knew that the reptiles were nearing their citadel. A moment more, and the ruddy gloom of the shut petals darkened and purpled about him, as if they had passed from the sunlight into a place of deep shadow. The thrumming of wings ceased abruptly, the living flower was dropped from a height on some hard surface and Maal Dweb was nearly hurled from his hiding-place by the violence of her fall. Moaning faintly, twitching a little, she lay where her captors had flung her. The

enchanter heard the hissing voices of the reptile wizards, the rough, sharp slithering of their tails on a stone floor, as they withdrew.

Whispering words of comfort to the dying blossom, he felt the petals relax about him. He crept forth very cautiously, and found himself in an immense, gloomily vaulted hall, whose windows were like the mouths of a deep cavern. The place was a sort of alchemy, a den of alien sorceries and abhorrent pharmaceutics. Everywhere, in the gloom, there were vats, cupels, furnaces, alembics and matrasses of unhuman form, bulking and towering colossally to the pigmy eyes of Maal Dweb. Close at hand, a monstrous cauldron fumed like a crater of black metal, its curving sides ascending far above the magician's head. None of the Ispazars was in sight; but, knowing that they might return at any moment, he hastened to make ready against them, feeling, for the first time in many years, the thrill of peril and expectation.

Manipulating the second amulet, he regained his normal proportions. The room, though still spacious, was no longer a hall of giants, and the cauldron beside him sank and lessened till its rim rose only to his shoulder. He saw now that the cauldron was filled with an unholy mixture of ingredients, among which were finely shredded portions of the missing flower-women, together with the gall of chimeras and the ambergris of leviathans. Heated by unseen fires, it boiled tumultuously, foaming with black, pitchy bubbles, and putting forth a nauseous vapor.

With the shrewd eye of a past master of all chemic lore, Maal Dweb proceeded to estimate the cauldron's various contents, and was then able to divine the purpose for which the brewage was intended. The conclusion to which he was driven appalled him slightly, and served to heighten his respect for the power and science of the reptile sorcerers. He saw, indeed, that it would be highly advisable to arrest their evolution.

After brief reflection, it occurred to him that, in accordance with chemical laws, the adding of certain simple components to the brewage would bring about an eventuation neither desired nor anticipated by the Ispazars. On high tables about the walls of the alchemy, there were jars, flasks and vials containing subtle drugs and powerful elements, some of which were drawn from the more arcanic kingdoms of nature. Disregarding the moon-powder, the coals of star-fire, the jellies made from the brains of gorgons, the ichor of salamanders, the dust of lethal fungi, the marrow of sphinxes, and other equally quaint and pernicious matters, the magician soon found the essences that he required. It was the work of an instant to pour them into the seething cauldron; and having done this, he awaited with composure the return of the reptiles.

The flower-woman, in the meanwhile, had ceased to moan and twitch. Maal Dweb knew that she was dead, since beings of this genus were unable to survive long when uprooted with such violence from their natal soil. She had folded herself to the face in her straitened petals, as if in a red and blackening shroud. He regarded her briefly, not without commiseration; and at that moment he heard the voices of the seven Ispazars, who had now re-entered the alchemy.

THEY came toward him among the crowded vessels, walking erect in the fashion of men on their short lizard legs, their ribbed and sabled wings retracted behind them, and their eyes glaring redly in the gloom. Two of them

were armed with long, sinuous-bladed knives; and others were equipped with enormous adamantine pestles, to be employed, no doubt, in bruising the flesh of the floral vampire.

When they saw the enchanter, they were both startled and angered. Their necks and torsos began to swell like the hoods of cobras, and a great hissing rose among them, like the noise of jetted steam. Their aspect would have struck terror to the heart of any common man; but Maal Dweb confronted them calmly, repeating aloud, in low, even tones, a word of sovereign protective power.

The Ispazars hurled themselves toward him, some running along the floor with an undulant slithering motion, and others rising on rapid-beating vans to attack him from above. All, however, dashed themselves vainly on the sphere of unseen force he had drawn about him through the utterance of the word of power. It was a strange thing to see them clawing vengefully at the void air, or striking futile blows with their weapons, which rang as if on a brazen wall.

Now, perceiving that the man before them was a sorcerer, the reptile magicians began to make use of their own abhuman sorcery. They called from the air great bolts of livid flame, python-shapen, which leaped and writhed incessantly, warring with the sphere of protective power, driving it back as a shield is driven by press of numbers in battle, but never breaking it down entirely. Also, they chanted evil, sibilant runes that were designed to charm away the magician's memory, and cause him to forget his magic. Sore was the travail of Maal Dweb as he fought the serpent fires and runes; and blood mingled with the sweat of his brow from that endeavor. But still, as the bolts struck nearer and the singing loudened, he kept uttering the unforgotten word; and the word still protected him.

Now, above the snaky chanting, he heard the deep hiss of the cauldron, boiling more turbulently than before because of those matters which he had added to its contents. And he saw, between the ever-writhing bolts, that a more voluminous vapor, dark as the steam of a primal fen, was mounting from the cauldron and spreading throughout the alchemy.

Soon the Ispazars were immersed in the fumes, as in a cloud of darkness; and dimly they began to coil and twist, convulsed with a strange agony. The python flames died out on the air, and the hissings of the Ispazars became inarticulate as those of common serpents. Then, falling to the floor, while the black mist gathered and thickened above them, they crawled to and fro on their bellies in the fashion of true reptiles; and, emerging at times from the vapor, they shrank and dwindled as if hell-fire had consumed them.

All this was even as Maal Dweb had planned. He knew that the Ispazars had forgotten their sorcery and science; and a swift devolution, flinging them back to the lowest state of serpenthood, had come upon them through the action of the vapor. But, before the completion of the change, he admitted one of the seven Ispazars to the sphere that now served to protect him from the fumes. The creature fawned at his feet like a tame dragon, acknowledging him for its master. Then, presently, the cloud of vapor began to lift, and he saw the other Ispazars, who were now little larger than fen-snakes. Their wings had withered into useless frills, and they crept and hissed on the floor, amid the alembics and crucibles and athanors of their lost science.

Maal Dweb regarded them for a little, not without pride in his own sorcery. The struggle had been difficult, even dangerous; and he reflected that his boredom

had been thoroughly overcome, at least for the nonce. From a practical standpoint, he had done well; for, in ridding the flower-women of their persecutors, he had also eradicated a possible future menace to his own dominion over the worlds of the three suns.

Turning to that Ispazar which he had spared for a necessary purpose, he seated himself firmly astride its back, behind the thick jointing of the vans. He spoke a magic word that was understood by the monster. Bearing him between its wings, it rose and flew obediently through one of the high windows; and, leaving behind it for ever the citadel that was not to be scaled by man, nor by any wingless creature, it carried the magician over the red horns of the sable mountains, across the valley where dwelt the sisterhood of floral vampires, and descended on the mossy knoll at the end of that silver drawbridge whereby he had entered Votalp. There Maal Dwab dismounted; and, followed by the crawling Ispazar, he began his return journey to Xiccarph through the hueless cloud, above the multi-dimensional deeps.

Midway in that peculiar transit, he heard a sharp, sudden clapping of wings. It ceased with remarkable abruptness, and was not repeated. Looking back, he found that the Ispazar had fallen from the bridge, and was vanishing brokenly amid irreconcilable angles, in the gulf from which there was no return.

On Hangman's Hill

By ROBERT AVRETT

On Hangman's Hill, at least so old men say,
  The passers-by in broad daylight can hear
The creak of chains upon a windy day,
  And moaning sounds as though of those in fear.

And folks will tell you that a man one night,
  A stranger who was simply passing by,
Saw outlined clear against the moonlit sky
  A scene that drove him into maddened flight.

For on that barren hill the gallows tree
  Groaned with the weight of three stark forms that swung
Above a crowd that danced in revelry,
  To wailing chants unknown to mortal tongue.

On Hangman's Hill no green grass ever grows,
Nor are there birds except for flocks of crows.

Muggridge's Aunt

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A story about a man who found it unwise to disobey the whims of a dying woman

MR. LEANDER MUGGRIDGE, having perceived the doctor's car at the curb, entered the house and stood waiting in the small vestibule until the medical man descended from his aunt's room. Muggridge was a methodical man, and his well-ordered mind was at this moment concerned with the thought of his aunt's always approaching but never imminent death. He stood, drawing off his gloves, having already placed his cane in the stand and hung his hat on the rack, and his thoughts were not kind.

It was useless to pretend any sort of sorrow over Aunt Edith. There had been no love lost between them, though it was probable that the old lady was not as conscious of it as he, since he could be pleasant, now that he was certain she must die. Then, too, there was the matter of having to support her and her old servant. True, it was not a large sum, considering his satisfactory income, but it was an annoying item to bother about. Besides that, her presence was an inconvenience in any number of ways. It was like her, he reflected, to take such a long time about dying.

Mr. Muggridge, despite the fact that he was very correctly attired in afternoon wear, was at heart intensely parsimonious, for which his aunt had frequently chidden him in those days when he had not taken the trouble to remind her of her dependence. In physical appearance, Muggridge was portly, with a fat, jovial face which thoroughly belied his small soul. He had fat, almost puffy hands, and his jowls were porcine. Add to that his sunken little eyes, and Muggridge emerged from the superficial aspect of a London gentleman to the status of a vulgar, moneyed poseur which he really was. Perhaps fortunately for Muggridge, few of his acquaintances ever realized his emergence, since they paid him scant attention, neither disliking him nor liking him.

The doctor came down the stairs just in time to stem Muggridge's rising impatience.

"Well, sir?" demanded Muggridge aggressively.

"She is sinking slowly, Mr. Muggridge," said the doctor, depositing his bag at his side while he shrugged into his topcoat and clapped his hat to his head. "She can not last longer than," and here he paused and cocked his head with his eyes fixed to a corner of the ceiling, "than tomorrow night, I should say."

"Is there anything to be done?" inquired Muggridge then, with surprizing civility.

"Nothing at all," replied the medical man, "unless it is to grant her anything she wishes, for she is certainly dying. She is, however, in no considerable pain; so rest easy on that score."

Muggridge smiled woodenly, reminded the doctor to send his bill promptly, and bade him good-afternoon. Then he ascended the stair slowly to his aunt's room, where he found the old lady deep in her

bed, with her servant at one side of the bed, holding her hand with all the devotion of the old to the old.

"Good afternoon, Aunt Edith," he said with a false joviality which he never could have felt in the presence of the two old ladies.

Aunt Edith murmured his name weakly, but the servant said nothing. Then the sick old lady brought up once again a subject which he had forbidden her to speak about, the house in which she had lived and in which she now lay dying.

"It is, after all, my house," she said in a whisper.

"You forget that I took it up after your bankruptcy, Aunt," he said shortly.

"You had no right to change things the way you did," the old lady went on unheedingly. "You might have left things the way they were until I died."

"Really, Aunt Edith," he said firmly.

"Are you going to remind me that I've lived the last years of my life on your generosity, and am now dying on it?" And the old lady turned her head and looked at him with such dark hatred in her dimming eyes that even the self-contained Muggridge quailed under it and mumbled a reply into his collar.

THERE was an uncomfortable silence for a while after that, with Muggridge increasingly aware of the bond between the two women, and the mutual hatred with which they regarded him. Presently, however, he asserted himself once more and sought to stare them down.

"Is there anything you would like me to do, Aunt Edith?" he asked.

At this, the old lady made an unsuccessful attempt to nod, and whispered, "Yes."

"What is it?"

"I want you to let Elsie remain here until she dies."

He felt sick at that, and looked briefly at the aging white head bent now above the servant's hand, into which she was quietly sobbing. He stifled an impulse to deny this last request.

"Very well," he said. "I will promise to keep Elsie with me. After all, she is our next of kin, is she not, Aunt Edith?"

"A very distant cousin, yes," said the sick woman. "But all we have, since you never married, Leander." Then there was a slight pause, before the old lady added, "Never let me hear of you speaking to her as you have spoken to me—reminding her of your kindness in allowing her to live here. If you do——" But here she was seized with a fit of coughing which prevented her from finishing her sentence, and afterward she had forgotten.

In the night, the old lady died.

MUGGRIDGE's Aunt Edith had scarcely been buried before he was thinking of some way to rid himself of Elsie. This was all the more reprehensible of him because he was well able to afford the charwoman who did for him, and Elsie was not at all in the way, she being an unobtrusive little woman. But he could not get over the feeling that she hated him, and in this his impression was not in error. She had not witnessed his cruel mistreatment of Edith Muggridge without conceiving a lasting hatred for him, and she fostered this hatred now as the one thing that bound her eternally to the friend who now lay deep in the grave.

Muggridge presently convinced himself that he must harden his heart, which was a pleasant irony indeed, for his heart already had, figuratively speaking, a great many stony qualities, and force the old lady away through successive unkindnesses. Accordingly, that very evening Muggridge seized the first opportunity to re-

mind Elsie that she was living here on his generosity. The old lady went off to her room in tears.

This result, while distasteful to him, nevertheless convinced Muggridge that his campaign against her would be entirely successful; he felt that Elsie would presently quit the house rather than endure such repeated reminders. He settled himself then to an evening with Compeers' *Legal Guide,* in the course of which he learned that in the event of sudden death and the absence of a will, the next of kin inherited the deceased's estate, subject, of course, to the usual tax for the Crown. This reminded him that he had not made a will, and he made a mental note to take care of that detail at his earliest convenience, since it seemed highly illogical to allow his estate to go to Elsie, presuming that by some accident his death should precede hers.

As he was going up the stairs that night he tripped and fell, and was able to avoid serious injury only because of the fortunate nearness of the banister, which he managed to seize and thus broke his fall. As it was, his shins were severely barked and one knee sustained a nasty bruise.

Having recovered momentarily, he thought that his accident was a curious one. There was nothing on the stairs to have upset his balance, and the rug was carefully tacked down. Upon mature reflection, it occurred to Leander Muggridge that his fall had been caused by his tripping over some object set in his way. But a search of the stairs and the hall below failed to reveal anything.

It was not until he was partly undressed for bed that it came to Muggridge how like an outstretched foot had been the thing that tripped him up. At the same time he remembered hearing an infinitesimally small sound just before he fell—like the rustling of skirts.

The emergence of these thoughts made him exceedingly angry, and, after a hasty whisky and soda, Muggridge went to bed. That night he dreamed that Aunt Edith was sitting upon his chest lecturing him the way she used to do when, as a small boy, he had accompanied her to the beach or down into the country. It was a most severe lecture indeed, and he awoke in a sweat, violently upset, so much so, indeed, that he could have sworn to having heard her voice very clearly saying, "This is my house, and you had no right to change it so!" He got to sleep again presently, feeling very unkindly toward the whisky and soda he had had.

In the morning he was inexpressibly rude to Elsie, but this time the old woman was vaguely defiant and did not burst into tears. This had the effect of upsetting Muggridge so much that he stamped off to the office leaving half his breakfast untouched, and convinced that he would have to be harsher than ever with Elsie. After he was gone, Elsie cried quite a bit, but of course Muggridge could not know that.

His return home that afternoon occasioned him a severe shock. He had not had the opportunity to enter his library in the morning, so that his entrance now was his first for that day. His shock was due to the fact that someone had ravaged his library. Some of his books had been torn in half and thrown into the grate, though a fire had not actually been lit. All his imported figurines had been smashed, and two pieces of rather modernistic furniture could never be used except as kindling from that time on.

He took in the details of the room, seeing that almost everything smashable had been smashed, save for a few old chairs and an ormolu clock on the mantel, and then marched off in a cold rage to upbraid Elsie. Elsie, however, solemnly

said that she had not been in his library, and claimed that the damage, if there was any, had certainly been done the preceding night, for what other explanation could there be for the crashings and bangings which had kept her awake well into the morning?

He stared at her in amazement.

If he would entertain young women at that hour of the night, she went on, it was not surprizing what things could happen.

"Young women!" he exclaimed, almost beside himself with rage and disbelief.

"A woman, at least," she replied then, still defiant, though now less sure of herself. "I heard her screaming at you," she went on. "I heard some of her very words."

"What were they?" he demanded bluntly.

"She said, 'This is my house, and you had no right to change it so!' " Then, suddenly realizing when she had last heard those words, Elsie collapsed in tears and hurried from the room.

As for Muggridge, he was most disagreeably upset. He had heard those words, too. But in a dream. Or was it? He turned on his heel and hurried swiftly back into the library, as if to assure himself that the damage was not all the figment of a dream. Unfortunately, it was not. His parsimonious soul shuddered at sight of it. Then, with a catch in his throat, he considered the things that had not been destroyed.

It took him only a moment to discover that the ormolu clock and the few old chairs, together with the majority of the books which remained untouched, had been the property of his Aunt Edith before he had taken possession.

He salvaged what he could out of the wreckage, working all the time with an odd feeling of being watched. Once he could have sworn that someone tittered; it was a sound uneasily like his Aunt Edith's shrill laugh. Unnerved, he persuaded himself finally that rest was what he needed, and left the library for bed considerably earlier than usual.

He saved himself from falling when tripped on the stairs that night only because he had gone up with extreme caution, as if he had expected that the thing he could not see would again obstruct his ascent. There was the sound of a skirt being drawn away, too; it was just like the sound made by the rustle of his Aunt Edith's old black silk dress.

THOUGH Muggridge was not a nervous man, he locked his bedroom door that night. But never a lock can keep out dreams, and he dreamed again in the dark about his Aunt Edith, looking very harmless, indeed, but going at him like a vixen for what he had done to her garden after taking advantage of a poor old woman's financial need and imposing his false generosity upon her. He woke again in a cold sweat and distinctly heard her voice dying away into the far corners of the room—"Carnations indeed! When you can have lobelias!"

His attempts to go to sleep after that were unsuccessful. In the morning, he maneuvered the stairs with a gingerliness that bordered upon the ridiculous. In the middle of his breakfast, he happened to look out into his garden, in which he took a proper English pride, and abruptly lost his appetite.

Hastily shoving away from the table, he strode from the house. The garden was indeed an unlovely mass of foliage. Someone had torn out all his lovely carnations and all the Holland tulips. The lobelias, however, and some primroses had remained untouched.

This time he did not see Elsie, for fear of what she might say to him.

He felt rather sick, and not a little afraid. When he went down the hall on the way to the office, he had Lincoln's Inn on the telephone and made an appointment with his solicitor. He had an uncanny feeling that his unmade will would bear early attention.

He had a bad day at the office, and his return home late that afternoon was an uneasy one, for there was no telling what might have taken place during the day. Fortunately for his peace of mind, nothing had happened beyond the usual routine, and he settled down to a recent novel with somewhat more aplomb. At the supper table he managed to crush his uneasiness sufficiently to be unkind to Elsie, but she only sat and looked at him out of glittering eyes, so that he was conscious of the hatred in them. And for a few minutes he could have sworn that another pair of hate-filled eyes was regarding him alongside Elsie's, though he could nee nothing to justify his impression.

Nevertheless, it was an uncomfortable thought. To his Aunt Edith's memory he made this concession: that, after all, the garden could feature lobelias, inasmuch as they had been her favorite flower. This, of course, was an easy enough concession to make, since almost everything else had been effectively destroyed, and it was too late to grow anything of great beauty in the ruins of his flower-beds.

It would have been reasonable to suppose that, in the light of these curiously suggestive happenings, Muggridge would have given up his campaign against Elsie. But Muggridge, being what he was, refused to back down in the slightest. He went to bed that night with the same caution that had characterized his descent of the treacherous stairs that morning. Once he could have taken oath that an attempt to trip him up had been made, and he came away from the stairs with a faint sense of triumph at having escaped.

That night again he dreamed. He saw himself playing cards with Aunt Edith, who held nothing but spade aces, half a dozen of them, with more in reserve. And Aunt Edith was saying with grim precision, "So now you have got to die, Leander. You were very unkind to me all the time—about the furniture and the lobelias and all. And I promised you that if you were unkind to Elsie you had got to die. And so you shall." All this time she played out those spade aces, which he knew very well were an absurd symbol of death for fortune-tellers, particularly gipsies. It was an unpleasant sort of dream, and how it might have gone on there is no knowing, for he was awakened out of his sleep by the conjuncture of the clock striking ten and the sharp skirling of the telephone bell.

The telephone sounded important, and, with the natural impulse of a trained business man, Leander Muggridge ran from his room and down the stairs. Half-way down, he tripped over something like an outflung foot and tumbled headlong. There was no mistaking the sound of Aunt Edith's tittering.

The telephone kept on ringing, and finally Elsie had to answer it. The call was from Muggridge's solicitor, who informed Elsie in an irate voice that Muggridge had failed to keep his appointment for that afternoon.

There was nothing, of course, that Elsie could do about that. For this time, because of the telephone, Muggridge had forgotten to be careful on the stairs, and had broken his neck.

Since there was no will, Elsie inherited Muggridge's estate fittingly enough. She was exceedingly cautious about little things, particularly about the lobelias.

The Secret in the Tomb

By ROBERT BLOCH

An eldritch tale of stark horror and a terrible rendezvous in a hidden mausoleum

THE wind howled strangely over a midnight tomb. The moon hung like a golden bat over ancient graves, glaring through the wan mist with its baleful, nyctalopic eye. Terrors not of the flesh might lurk among cedar-shrouded sepulchers or creep unseen amid shadowed cenotaphs, for this was unhallowed ground. But tombs hold strange secrets, and there are mysteries blacker than the night, and more leprous than the moon.

It was in search of such a secret that I came, alone and unseen, to my ancestral vault at midnight. My people had been sorcerers and wizards in the olden days, so lay apart from the resting-place of other men, here in this moldering mausoleum in a forgotten spot, surrounded only by the graves of those who had been their servants. But not all the servants lay here, for there are those who do not die.

On through the mist I pressed, to where the crumbling sepulcher loomed among the brooding trees. The wind rose to torrential violence as I trod the obscure pathway to the vaulted entrance, extinguishing my lantern with malefic fury. Only the moon remained to light my way in a luminance unholy. And thus I reached the nitrous, fungus-bearded portals of the family vault. Here the moon shone upon a door that was not like other doors—a single massive slab of iron, imbedded in monumental walls of granite. Upon its outer surface was neither handle, lock nor keyhole, but the whole was covered with carvings portentous of a leering evil—cryptic symbols whose allegorical significance filled my soul with a deeper loathing than mere words can impart. There are things that are not good to look upon, and I did not care to dwell too much in thought on the possible genesis of a mind whose knowledge could create such horrors in concrete form. So in blind and trembling haste I chanted the obscure litany and performed the necessary obeisances demanded in the ritual I had learned, and at their conclusion the cyclopean portal swung open.

Within was darkness, deep, funereal, ancient; yet, somehow, uncannily *alive*. It held a pulsing adumbration, a suggestion of muted, yet purposeful rhythm, and overshadowing all, an air of black, impinging *revelation*. The simultaneous effect upon my consciousness was one of those reactions misnamed intuitions. I sensed that shadows know queer secrets, and there are some skulls that have reason to grin.

Yet I must go on into the tomb of my forebears—tonight the last of all our line would meet the first. For I was the last. Jeremy Strange had been the first—he who fled from the Orient to seek refuge in centuried Eldertown, bringing with him the loot of many tombs and a secret for ever nameless. It was he who had built his sepulcher in the twilight woods where the witch-lights gleam, and here he had interred his own remains,

shunned in death as he had been in life. But buried with him was a secret, and it was this that I had come to seek. Nor was I the first in so seeking, for my father and his father before me, indeed, the eldest of each generation back to the days of Jeremy Strange himself, had likewise sought that which was so maddeningly described in the wizard's diary—the secret of eternal life after death. The musty yellowed tome had been handed down to the elder son of each successive generation, and likewise, so it seemed, the dread atavistic craving for black and accursed knowledge, the thirst for which, coupled with the damnably explicit hints set forth in the warlock's record, had sent every one of my paternal ancestors so bequeathed to a final rendezvous in the night, to seek their heritage within the tomb. What they found, none could say, for none had ever returned.

It was, of course, a family secret. The tomb was never mentioned—it had, indeed, been virtually forgotten with the passage of years that had likewise eradicated many of the old legends and fantastic accusations about the first Strange that had once been common property in the village. The family, too, had been mercifully spared all knowledge of the curse-ridden end to which so many of its men had come. Their secret delvings into black arts; the hidden library of antique lore and demonological formulæ brought by Jeremy from the East; the diary and its secret—all were undreamt of save by the eldest sons. The rest of the line prospered. There had been sea captains, soldiers, merchants, statesmen. Fortunes were won. Many departed from the old mansion on the cape, so that in my father's time he had lived there alone with the servants and myself. My mother died at my birth, and it was a lonely youth I spent in the great brown house, with a father half-crazed by the tragedy of my mother's end, and shadowed by the monstrous secret of our line. It was he who initiated me into the mysteries and arcana to be found amid the shuddery speculations of such blasphemies as the *Necronomicon,* the *Book of Eibon,* the *Cabala of Saboth,* and that pinnacle of literary madness, Ludvig Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm.* There were grim treatises on anthropomancy, necrology, lycanthropical and vampiristic spells and charms, witchcraft, and long, rambling screeds in Arabic, Sanskrit and prehistoric ideography, on which lay the dust of centuries.

All these he gave me, and more. There were times when he would whisper strange stories about voyages he had taken in his youth—of islands in the sea, and queer survivals spawning dreams beneath arctic ice. And one night he told me of the legend, and the tomb in the forest; and together we turned the worm-riddled pages of the iron-bound diary that was hidden in the panel above the chimney-corner. I was very young, but not too young to know certain things, and as I swore to keep the secret as so many had sworn before me, I had a queer feeling that the time had come for Jeremy to claim his own. For in my father's somber eyes was the same light of dreadful thirst for the unknown, curiosity, and an inward urge that had glowed in the eyes of all the others before him, previous to the time they had announced their intention of "going on a trip" or "joining up" or "attending to a business matter." Most of them had waited till their children were grown, or their wives had passed on; but whenever they had left, and whatever their excuse, they had never returned.

Two days later, my father disappeared,

after leaving word with the servants that he was spending the week in Boston. Before the month was out there was the usual investigation, and the usual failure. A will was discovered among my father's papers, leaving me as sole heir, but the books and the diary were secure in the secret rooms and panels known now to me alone.

Life went on. I did the usual things in the usual way—attended university, traveled, and returned at last to the house on the hill, alone. But with me I carried a mighty determination—I alone could thwart that curse; I alone could grasp the secret that had cost the lives of seven generations—and I alone must do so. The world had nought to offer one who had spent his youth in the study of the mocking truths that lie beyond the outward beauties of a purposeless existence, and I was not afraid. I dismissed the servants, ceased communication with distant relatives and a few close friends, and spent my days in the hidden chambers amid the elder lore, seeking a solution or a spell of such potency as would serve to dispel for ever the mystery of the tomb.

A hundred times I read and reread that hoary script—the diary whose fiend-penned promise had driven men to doom. I searched amid the satanic spells and cabalistic incantations of a thousand forgotten necromancers, delved into pages of impassioned prophecy, burrowed into secret legendary lore whose written thoughts writhed through me like serpents from the pit. It was in vain. All I could learn was the ceremony by which access could be obtained to the tomb in the wood. Three months of study had worn me to a wraith and filled my brain with the diabolic shadows of charnel-spawned knowledge, but that was all. And then, as if in mockery of madness, there had come the call, this very night.

I HAD been seated in the study, pondering upon a maggot-eaten volume of Heiriarchus' *Occultus*, when without warning, I felt a tremendous urge keening through my weary brain. It beckoned and allured with unutterable promise, like the mating-cry of the lamia of old; yet at the same time it held an inexorable power whose potency could not be defied or denied. The inevitable was at hand. I had been summoned to the tomb. I must follow the beguiling voice of inner consciousness that was the invitation and the promise, that sounded my soul like the ultra-rhythmic piping of trans-cosmic music. So I had come, alone and weaponless, to the lonely woods and to that wherein I would meet my destiny.

The moon rose redly over the manor as I left, but I did not look back. I saw its reflection in the waters of the brook that crept between the trees, and in its light the water was as blood. Then the fog rose silently from the swamp, and a yellow ghost-light rode the sky, beckoning me on from behind the black and bloated trees whose branches, swept by a dismal wind, pointed silently toward the distant tomb. Roots and creepers impeded my feet, vines and brambles restrained my body, but in my ears thundered a chorus of urgency that can not be described and which could not be delayed, by nature or by man.

Now, as I hesitated upon the door-step, a million idiot voices gibbered an invitation to enter that mortal mind could not withstand. Through my brain resounded the horror of my heritage—the insatiable craving to know the forbidden, to mingle and become one with it. A pæan of hell-born music crescendoed in my ears, and earth was blotted out in a mad urge that engulfed all being.

I paused no longer upon the threshold. I went in, in where the smell of death

filled the darkness that was like the sun over Yuggoth. The door closed, and then came—what? I do not know—I only realized that suddenly I could see and feel and hear, despite darkness, and dankness, and silence.

I was in the tomb. Its monumental walls and lofty ceiling were black and bare, lichened by the passage of centuries. In the center of the mausoleum stood a single slab of black marble. Upon it rested a gilded coffin, set with strange symbols, and covered by the dust of ages. I knew instinctively what it must contain, and the knowledge did not serve to put me at my ease. I glanced at the floor, then wished I hadn't. Upon the debris-strewn base beneath the slab lay a ghastly, disarticulated group of mortuary remains—half-fleshed cadavers and desiccated skeletons. When I thought of my father and the others, I was possessed of a sickening dismay. They too had sought, and they had failed. And now I had come, alone, to find that which had brought them to an end unholy and unknown. The secret! The secret in the tomb!

Mad eagerness filled my soul. I too would know—I must! As in a dream I swayed to the gilded coffin. A moment I tottered above it; then, with a strength born of delirium, I tore away the paneling and lifted the gilded lid, and then I knew it was no dream, for dreams can not approach the ultimate horror that was the creature lying within the coffin — that creature with eyes like a midnight demon's, and a face of loathsome delirium that was like the death-mask of a devil. It was smiling, too, as it lay there, and my soul shrieked in the tortured realization that it was *alive!* Then I knew it all; the secret and the penalty paid by those who sought it, and I was ready for death, but horrors had not ceased, for even as I gazed it spoke, in a voice like the hissing of a black slug.

And there within the nighted gloom it whispered the secret, staring at me with ageless, deathless eyes, so that I should not go mad before I heard the whole of it. All was revealed—the secret crypts of blackest nightmare where the tomb-spawn dwell, and of a price whereby a man may become one with ghouls, living after death as a devourer in darkness. Such a thing had it become, and from this shunned, accursed tomb had sent the call to the descending generations, that when they came, there might be a ghastly feast whereby it might continue a dread, eternal life. I (it breathed) would be the next to die, and in my heart I knew that it was so.

I could not avert my eyes from its accursed gaze, nor free my soul from its hypnotic bondage. The thing on the bier cackled with unholy laughter. My blood froze, for I saw two long, lean arms, like the rotted limbs of a corpse, steal slowly toward my fear-constricted throat. The monster sat up, and even in the clutches of my horror, I realized that there was a dim and awful resemblance between the creature in the coffin and a certain ancient portrait back in the Hall. But this was a transfigured reality — Jeremy the man become Jeremy the ghoul; and I knew that it would do no good to resist. Two claws, cold as flames of icy hell, fastened around my throat, two eyes bored like maggots through my frenzied being, a laughter born of madness alone cachinnated in my ears like the thunder of doom. The bony fingers tore at my eyes and nostrils, held me helpless while yellow fangs champed nearer and nearer to my throat. The world spun, wrapped in a mist of fiery death.

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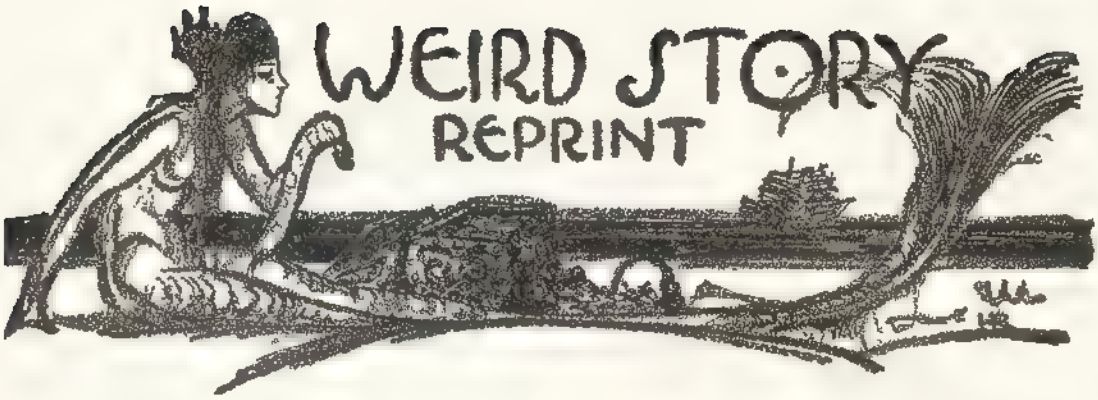

Arthur Jermyn*

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

LIFE is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer demoniacal hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous. Science, already oppressive with its shocking revelations, will perhaps be the ultimate exterminator of our human species—if separate species we be—for its reserve of unguessed horrors could never be borne by mortal brains if loosed upon the world.

If we knew what we are, we should do as Sir Arthur Jermyn did; and Arthur Jermyn soaked himself in oil and set fire to his clothing one night. No one placed the charred fragments in an urn or set a memorial to him who had been; for certain papers and a certain boxed *object* were found, which made men wish to forget. Some who knew him do not admit that he ever existed.

Arthur Jermyn went out on the moor and burned himself after seeing the boxed *object* which had come from Africa. It was this *object*, and not his peculiar personal appearance, which made him end his life.

Many would have disliked to live if possessed of the peculiar features of Arthur Jermyn, but he had been a poet and scholar and had not minded. Learning was in his blood, for his great-grandfather, Sir Robert Jermyn, Bart., had been an anthropologist of note, whilst his great-great-great-grandfather, Sir Wade Jermyn, was one of the earliest explorers of the Congo region, and had written eruditely of its tribes, animals, and supposed antiquities. Indeed, old Sir Wade had possessed an intellectual zeal amounting almost to a mania; his bizarre conjectures on a prehistoric white Congolese civilization earning him much ridicule when his book, *Observations on the Several Parts of Africa,* was published. In 1765 this fearless explorer had been placed in a madhouse at Huntingdon.

Madness was in all the Jermyns, and people were glad there were not many of them. The line put forth no branches, and Arthur was the last of it. If he had not been, one can not say what he would have done when the *object* came.

The Jermyns never seemed to look quite right—something was amiss, though Arthur was the worst, and the old family

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portraits in Jermyn House showed fine faces enough before Sir Wade's time. Certainly, the madness began with Sir Wade, whose wild stories of Africa were at once the delight and terror of his few friends. It showed in his collection of trophies and specimens, which were not such as a normal man would accumulate and preserve, and appeared strikingly in the Oriental seclusion in which he kept his wife. The latter, he had said, was the daughter of a Portuguese trader whom he had met in Africa; and she did not like English ways. She, with an infant son born in Africa, had accompanied him back from the second and longest of his trips, and had gone with him on the third and last, never returning.

No one had ever seen her closely, not even the servants; for her disposition had been violent and singular. During her brief stay at Jermyn House she occupied a remote wing, and was waited on by her husband alone. Sir Wade was, indeed, most peculiar in his solicitude for his family; for when he returned to Africa he would permit no one to care for his young son save a loathsome black woman from Guinea. Upon coming back, after the death of Lady Jermyn, he himself assumed complete care of the boy.

But it was the talk of Sir Wade, especially when in his cups, which chiefly led his friends to deem him mad. In a rational age like the Eighteenth Century it was unwise for a man to talk about wild sights and strange scenes under a Congo moon; of the gigantic walls and pillars of a forgotten city, crumbling and vine-grown, and of damp, silent, stone steps leading interminably down into the darkness of abysmal treasure-vaults and inconceivable catacombs. Especially was it unwise to rave of the living things that might haunt such a place; of creatures half of the jungle and half of the impiously aged city—fabulous creatures which even a Pliny might describe with skepticism; things that might have sprung up after the great apes had overrun the dying city with the walls and the pillars, the vaults and the weird carvings.

Yet after he came home for the last time Sir Wade would speak of such matters with a shudderingly uncanny zest, mostly after his third glass at the Knight's Head; boasting of what he had found in the jungle and of how he had dwelt among terrible ruins known only to him. And finally he had spoken of the living things in such a manner that he was taken to the madhouse.

He had shown little regret when shut into the barred room at Huntingdon, for his mind moved curiously. Ever since his son had commenced to grow out of infancy he had liked his home less and less, till at last he had seemed to dread it. The Knight's Head had been his headquarters, and when he was confined he expressed some vague gratitude as if for protection.

Three years later he died.

WADE JERMYN'S son, Philip, was a highly peculiar person. Despite a strong physical resemblance to his father, his appearance and conduct were in many particulars so coarse that he was universally shunned. Though he did not inherit the madness which was feared by some, he was densely stupid and given to brief periods of uncontrollable violence. In frame he was small, but intensely powerful, and was of incredible agility.

Twelve years after succeeding to his title he married the daughter of his gamekeeper, a person said to be of gipsy extraction, but before his son was born he joined the navy as a common sailor, completing the general disgust which his habits and mesalliance had begun. After the

close of the American war he was heard of as a sailor on a merchantman in the African trade, having a kind of reputation for feats of strength and climbing, but finally disappearing one night as his ship lay off the Congo coast.

In the son of Sir Philip Jermyn the now accepted family peculiarity took a strange and fatal turn. Tall and fairly handsome, with a sort of weird Eastern grace despite certain slight oddities of proportion, Robert Jermyn began life as a scholar and investigator. It was he who first studied scientifically the vast collection of relics which his mad grandfather had brought from Africa, and who made the family name as celebrated in ethnology as in exploration.

In 1815, Sir Robert married a daughter of the seventh Viscount Brightholme and was subsequently blessed with three children, the eldest and youngest of whom were never publicly seen on account of deformities in mind and body. Saddened by these family misfortunes, the scientist sought relief in work, and made two long expeditions in the interior of Africa. In 1849, his second son, Nevil, a singularly repellent person who seemed to combine the surliness of Philip Jermyn with the hauteur of the Brightholmes, ran away with a vulgar dancer, but was pardoned upon his return in the following year. He came back to Jermyn House a widower with an infant son, Alfred, who was one day to be the father of Arthur Jermyn.

Friends said that it was this series of griefs which unhinged the mind of Sir Robert Jermyn, yet it was probably merely a bit of African folklore which caused the disaster. The elderly scholar had been collecting legends of the Onga tribes near the field of his grandfather's and his own explorations, hoping in some way to account for Sir Wade's wild tales of a lost city peopled by strange hybrid creatures. A certain consistency in the strange papers of his ancestor suggested that the madman's imagination might have been stimulated by native myths.

On October 19, 1852, the explorer Samuel Seaton called at Jermyn House with a manuscript of notes, collected among the Ongas, believing that certain legends of a gray city of white apes ruled by a white god might prove valuable to the ethnologist. In his conversation he probably supplied many additional details, the nature of which will never be known, since a hideous series of tragedies suddenly burst into being.

When Sir Robert Jermyn emerged from his library he left behind the strangled corpse of the explorer, and before he could be restrained, had put an end to all three of his children; the two who were never seen, and the son who had run away. Nevil Jermyn died in the successful defense of his own two-year-old son, who had apparently been included in the old man's madly murderous scheme. Sir Robert himself, after repeated attempts at suicide and a stubborn refusal to utter any articulate sound, died of apoplexy in the second year of his confinement.

Sir Alfred Jermyn was a baronet before his fourth birthday, but his tastes never matched his title. At twenty he had joined a band of music-hall performers, and at thirty-six had deserted his wife and child to travel with an itinerant American circus.

His end was very revolting. Among the animals in the exhibition with which he traveled was a huge bull gorilla of lighter color than the average; a surprizingly tractable beast of much popularity with the performers. With this gorilla Alfred Jermyn was singularly fascinated, and on many occasions the two would eye each

other for long periods through the intervening bars.

Eventually Jermyn asked and obtained permission to train the animal, astonishing audiences and fellow-performers alike with his success. One morning in Chicago, as the gorilla and Alfred Jermyn were rehearsing an exceedingly clever boxing match, the former delivered a blow of more than usual force, hurting both the body and the dignity of the amateur trainer.

Of what followed, members of "The Greatest Show on Earth" do not like to speak. They did not expect to hear Sir Alfred Jermyn emit a shrill, inhuman scream, or to see him seize his clumsy antagonist with both hands, dash it to the floor of the cage, and bite fiendishly at its hairy throat. The gorilla was off its guard, but not for long, and before anything could be done by the regular trainer the body which had belonged to a baronet was past recognition.

ARTHUR JERMYN was the son of Sir Alfred Jermyn and a music-hall singer of unknown origin. When the husband and father deserted his family, the mother took the child to Jermyn House; where there was none left to object to her presence. She was not without notions of what a baronet's dignity should be, and saw to it that her son received the best education which limited money could provide.

The family resources were now sadly slender, and Jermyn House had fallen into woful disrepair, but young Arthur loved the old edifice and all its contents. He was not like any other Jermyn who had ever lived, for he was a poet and a dreamer. Some of the neighboring families who had heard tales of old Sir Wade Jermyn's unseen Portuguese wife, declared that her Latin blood must be showing itself; but most persons merely sneered at his sensitiveness to beauty, attributing it to his music-hall mother, who was socially unrecognized.

The poetic delicacy of Arthur Jermyn was the more remarkable because of his uncouth personal appearance. Most of the Jermyns had possessed a subtly odd and repellent cast, but Arthur's case was very striking. It is hard to say just what he resembled, but his expression, his facial angle, and the length of his arms gave a thrill of repulsion to those who met him for the first time.

It was the mind and character of Arthur Jermyn which atoned for his aspect. Gifted and learned, he took highest honors at Oxford and seemed likely to redeem the intellectual fame of his family. Though of poetic rather than scientific temperament, he planned to continue the work of his forefathers in African ethnology and antiquities, utilizing the truly wonderful though strange collection of Sir Wade. With his fanciful mind he thought often of the prehistoric civilization in which the mad explorer had so implicitly believed, and would weave tale after tale about the silent jungle city mentioned in the latter's wilder notes and paragraphs. For the nebulous utterances concerning a nameless, unsuspected race of jungle hybrids he had a peculiar feeling of mingled terror and attraction; speculating on the possible basis of such a fancy, and seeking to obtain light among the more recent data gleaned by his great-grandfather and Samuel Seaton amongst the Ongas.

In 1911, after the death of his mother, Sir Arthur Jermyn determined to pursue his investigations to the utmost extent. Selling a portion of his estate to obtain the requisite money, he outfitted an expedition and sailed for the Congo. Arranging with the Belgian authorities for

a party of guides, he spent a year in the Onga and Kaliri country, finding data beyond the highest of his expectations. Among the Kaliris was an aged chief called Mwanu, who possessed not only a highly retentive memory, but a singular degree of intelligence and interest in old legends. This ancient confirmed every tale which Jermyn had heard, adding his own account of the stone city and the white apes as it had been told to him.

According to Mwanu, the gray city and the hybrid creatures were no more, having been annihilated by the war-like N'bangus many years ago. This tribe, after destroying most of the edifices and killing the live beings, had carried off the Stuffed Goddess which had been the object of their quest; the white ape-goddess which the strange beings worshipped, and which was held by Congo tradition to be the form of one who had reigned as a princess among those beings. Just what the white ape-like creatures could have been, Mwanu had no idea, but he thought they were the builders of the ruined city. Jermyn could form no conjecture, but by close questioning obtained a very picturesque legend of the Stuffed Goddess.

The ape-princess, it was said, became the consort of a great white god who had come out of the West. For a long time they had reigned over the city together, but when they had a son all three went away. Later the god and the princess had returned, and upon the death of the princess her divine husband had mummified the body and enshrined it in a vast house of stone, where it was worshipped. Then he had departed alone.

The legend here seemed to present three variants. According to one story nothing further happened save that the Stuffed Goddess became a symbol of supremacy for whatever tribe might possess it. It was for this reason that the N'bangus carried it off. A second story told of the god's return and death at the feet of his enshrined wife. A third told of the return of the son, grown to manhood—or apehood or godhood, as the case might be—yet unconscious of his identity. Surely the imaginative blacks had made the most of whatever events might lie behind the extravagant legendry.

Of the reality of the old jungle city described by Sir Wade, Arthur Jermyn had no further doubt; and was hardly astonished when, early in 1912, he came upon what was left of it. Its size must have been exaggerated, yet the stones lying about proved that it was no mere negro village. Unfortunately, no carvings could be found, and the small size of the expedition prevented operations toward clearing the one visible passageway that seemed to lead down into the system of vaults which Sir Wade had mentioned. The white apes and the Stuffed Goddess were discussed with all the native chiefs of the region, but it remained for a European to improve on the data offered by old Mwanu. M. Verhaeren, Belgian agent at a trading-post on the Congo, believed that he could not only locate but also obtain the Stuffed Goddess, of which he had vaguely heard; since the once mighty N'bangus were now the submissive servants of King Albert's government, and with but little persuasion could be induced to part with the gruesome deity they had carried off.

When Jermyn sailed for England, therefore, it was with the exultant probability that he would within a few months receive a priceless ethnological relic confirming the wildest of his great-great-great-grandfather's narratives — that is, the wildest which he had ever heard. Countrymen near Jermyn House had per-

haps heard wilder tales handed down from ancestors who had listened to Sir Wade around the tables of the Knight's Head.

ARTHUR JERMYN waited very patiently for the expected box from M. Verhaeren, meanwhile studying with increased diligence the manuscripts left by his mad ancestor. He began to feel closely akin to Sir Wade, and to seek relics of the latter's personal life in England as well as of his African exploits. Oral accounts of the mysterious and secluded wife had been numerous, but no tangible relic of her stay at Jermyn House remained. Jermyn wondered what circumstance had prompted or permitted such an effacement, and decided that the husband's insanity was the prime cause.

His great-great-great-grandmother, he recalled, was said to have been the daughter of a Portuguese trader in Africa. No doubt her practical heritage and superficial knowledge of the Dark Continent had caused her to flout Sir Wade's tales of the interior, a thing which such a man would not be likely to forgive. She had died in Africa, perhaps dragged thither by a husband determined to prove what he had told. But as Jermyn indulged in these reflections he could not but smile at their futility, a century and a half after the death of both of his strange progenitors.

In June, 1913, a letter arrived from M. Verhaeren, telling of the finding of the Stuffed Goddess. It was, the Belgian averred, a most extraordinary object; an object quite beyond the power of a layman to classify. Whether it was human or simian only a scientist could determine, and the process of determination would be greatly hampered by its imperfect condition. Time and the Congo climate are not kind to mummies; especially when their preparation is as amateurish as seemed to be the case here. Around the creature's neck had been found a golden chain bearing an empty locket on which were armorial designs; no doubt some hapless traveler's keepsake, taken by the N'bangus and hung upon the goddess as a charm. In commenting on the contour of the mummy's face, M. Verhaeren suggested a whimsical comparison; or rather, expressed humorous wonder just how it would strike his correspondent, but was too much interested scientifically to waste many words in levity. The Stuffed Goddess, he wrote, would arrive, duly packed, about a month after receipt of the letter.

The boxed object was delivered at Jermyn House on the afternoon of August 3, 1913, being conveyed immediately to the large chamber which housed the collection of African specimens as arranged by Sir Robert and Arthur. What ensued can best be gathered from the tales of servants and from things and papers later examined. Of the various tales, that of aged Soames, the family butler, is most ample and coherent. According to this trustworthy man, Sir Arthur Jermyn dismissed everyone from the room before opening the box, though the instant sound of hammer and chisel showed that he did not delay the operation. Nothing was heard for some time; just how long Soames can not exactly estimate, but it was certainly less than a quarter of an hour later that the horrible scream, undoubtedly in Jermyn's voice, was heard.

Immediately afterward Jermyn emerged from the room, rushed frantically toward the front of the house as if pursued by some hideous enemy. The expression on his face, a face ghastly enough in repose, was beyond description. When near the front door he seemed to think of something, and turned back in his flight, final-

ly disappearing down the stairs to the cellar. The servants were utterly dumfounded, and watched at the head of the stairs, but their master did not return. A smell of oil was all that came up from the regions below.

After dark a rattling was heard at the door leading from the cellar into the courtyard; and a stable-boy saw Arthur Jermyn, glistening from head to foot with oil and redolent of that fluid, steal furtively out and vanish on the black moor surrounding the house. Then, in an exaltation of supreme horror, everyone saw the end. A spark appeared on the moor, a flame arose, and a pillar of human fire reached to the heavens. The House of Jermyn no longer existed.

The reason why Arthur Jermyn's fragments were not collected and buried lies in what was found afterward; principally the thing in the box. The Stuffed Goddess was a nauseous sight, withered and eaten away, but it was clearly a mummified white ape of some unknown species, less hairy than any recorded variety, and infinitely nearer mankind—quite shockingly so.

Detailed description would be rather unpleasant, but two salient particulars must be told, for they fit in revoltingly with certain notes of Sir Wade Jermyn's African expeditions and with the Congolese legends of the white god and the ape-princess. The two particulars in question are these: The arms on the golden locket about the creature's neck were the Jermyn arms, and the jocose suggestion of M. Verhaeren about a certain resemblance as connected with the shriveled face applied with vivid, ghastly, and unnatural horror to none other than the sensitive Arthur Jermyn, great-great-great-grandson of Sir Wade Jermyn and an unknown wife.

Members of the Royal Anthropological Institute burned the thing and threw the locket into a well, and some of them do not admit that Arthur Jermyn ever existed.

Tea-Drinking

By HUNG LONG TOM

Tea-drinking
Is a gentle art
Best practised
In a room serene
With open windows
Through which drifts
Breath of wisteria,
And from a cup
That blends in color
With the precious beverage.
In the aroma
Lies strange lasting peace.

The Secret in the Tomb

(Continued from page 641)

Suddenly the spell broke. I wrenched my eyes away from that slavering, evil face, and instantly, like a cataclysmic flash of light, came realization. This creature's power was purely mental—by that alone were my ill-fated kinsmen drawn here, and by that alone were they overcome, but once one were free from the strength of the monster's awful eyes—good God! Was I going to be the victim of a crumbled mummy?

My right arm swung up, striking the horror between the eyes. There was a sickening crunch; then dead flesh yielded before my hand as I seized the now faceless lich in my arms and cast it into fragments upon the bone-covered floor. Streaming with perspiration and mumbling in hysteria and terrible revulsion, I saw the moldy fragments move even in a second death—a severed hand crawled across the flagging, upon musty, shredded fingers; a leg began to roll with the animation of grotesque, unholy life. With a shriek, I cast a lighted match upon that loathsome corpse, and I was still shrieking as I clawed open the portals and rushed out of the tomb and into the world of sanity, leaving behind me a smoldering fire from whose charred heart a terrible voice still faintly moaned its tortured requiem to that which had once been Jeremy Strange.

The tomb is razed now, and with it the forest graves and all the hidden chambers and manuscripts that serve as a reminder of ghoul-ridden memories that can never be forgot. For earth hides a madness and dreams a hideous reality, and monstrous things abide in the shadows of death, lurking and waiting to seize the souls of those who meddle with forbidden things.

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WE HAVE received a number of letters asking who is the artist who signs J. D. to his drawings. His name is Joseph Doolin. He is represented in this issue by the illustration for *Lord of the Lamia.* Other artists who are doing and will continue to do illustrations for WT are James Napoli, who has done most of the drawings for this issue; Hugh Rankin, who has drawn the illustration for *Beyond the Black River;* and John R. Binder, who drew most of the illustrations in last month's issue. Mr. Binder (better known as Jack) did the full-page illustration last month for *Shadows of Blood,* written by his talented brothers, Earl and Otto Binder, under the pen name Eando Binder. The art heading for the Weird Story Reprint was drawn by Hugh Rankin; the art heading for the Eyrie is the work of Andrew Brosnatch.

Cheers for Mrs. Brundage

Michael Liene, of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, writes: "The March issue of WEIRD TALES began tremendously with the cover design. There has been on the cover of almost every magazine published, a beautiful damosel (and they are always blonds, too), abed and in terror of horrible clutching hands that reach out for her shrinking form through the draperies. BUT—Mrs. Brundage, your superb artist, depicted it with such an exquisite and soft-toned touch (as though everything is in hushed stillness), that it seems as though she were the originator of the idea for such a scene. A beautiful girl (as lovely as every reader wants the heroine of the story to be)—showing real fear and horror on her face—and well drawn and very artistically colored. Cheers! —for Mrs. Brundage. Never let her get away from conceiving pastel designs for your magazine covers; if she does, half the enchantment of WEIRD TALES is lost. . . . Otis Adelbert Kline's *Lord of the Lamia* certainly began thrillingly. Though not one of Mr. Kline's fans, I will certainly become one if the first part of this new serial means that the succeeding installments are to be much more vivid. Mr. Kline always delved in stories of the interplanetary sort; and not caring for such stories, I always turned up my nose at his name. But *Lord of the Lamia* is certainly not a story to turn one's nose up at. . . . And then—*Julhi,* by that writer of writers, C. L. Moore. The plot is terrible, yes—it smacks of his other stories—but oh! the way in which *Julhi* is written! Of any stories of Mr. Moore's I've read, *Julhi*—for its beautiful prose—certainly is a masterpiece. I've read it over several times, and every time I find more beautiful phrases than before. Mr. Moore writes in such a quiet yet vivid style. One realizes that he is not showing off his use of an exceptional vocabulary, but that he writes naturally, easily and gracefully. I give *Julhi* my vote for first choice in the March issue of WEIRD TALES."

Smith for Dessert

Alvin V. Pershing writes from Bloomington, Indiana: "Give us another story by Bloch. His first story went over big. . . . But no Smith story for two months! You have forgotten that for a large number of readers we must have a Clark Ashton Smith story for dessert each month. I feel fairly famished waiting for another refreshment from him."

For Weird-Scientific Stories

A. S. Doan, of Fort Wayne, Indiana, writes: "Have just finished reading the March issue of WT, and it is, I think, the

best issue in years. Every story was good, and a larger range of subjects was covered than in any other issue I can recall. I confess myself unable to choose a 'best' story from those appearing in the March issue. Keep up the good work. Please do not print any more pseudo-weird stories such as *On Top* and *Murder in the Grave*. I enjoy reading the Eyrie quite as much as the stories. Am glad you have decided to continue publishing weird-scientific stories, as I am sure the majority of WT fans like them. While mentioning the Eyrie, I want to register a complaint against printing letters from authors who adversely criticize the work of other authors. Besides showing a lack of fairness and sportsmanship on the part of the writers, it indicates a lack of respect for the desires of the readers, who purchase the magazine and provide a market for their own stories. It is probable that Mr. Bloch wrote in haste and is repenting at leisure as regards his severe criticism of Conan, the admirable barbarian of Robert E. Howard's stories. Mr. Bloch's story, *The Feast in the Abbey*, was a good story, with a good plot and well worked out as to detail. There was, however, one detrimental feature. This was its verboseness."

Robert Bloch's Rejoinder

Robert Bloch, author of *The Feast in the Abbey*, writes to the editor: "I have been highly interested in the comments anent my so-called 'attack' on Howard in the Eyrie. Now, in all fairness to myself and such readers as Mr. Mashburn, allow me to rise in my own defense against the accusation of using 'polecat tactics'. I believe the following points will serve to clear up the matter. 1st.—I did not attack Howard. On the contrary, my November letter contains only a pseudo-frenzied tirade against one of his heroes, Conan. If you recall, my previous Eyrie letter of April 1934 praises Mr. Howard to the skies for his fine *Valley of the Worm* and his Solomon Kane stories. At no time have I ever, directly or indirectly, maligned Mr. Howard's fine and obviously talented abilities as a writer; I confined myself solely to a criticism of Conan's career. 2nd.—I have no desire to 'rival' Mr. Howard. I do not presume to pit my seventeen years and some months against his mature brain, nor shall I. 3rd.—I wholly agree with Mr.

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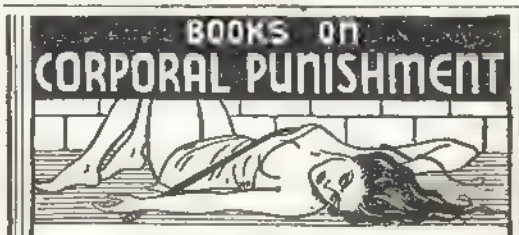

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Mashburn's views regarding the unethical policy of criticizing a fellow-author. But at the time I wrote that letter I had never had anything printed in WEIRD TALES or any other magazine; consequently, when it appeared, I was not an author at all, but a plain reader, with a reader's rights of criticism. My letter was in November, my first tale in January. I had no intention of doing anything that might be construed as unethical, nor can I be considered so in view of these facts. And that, I hope, settles matters. I am glad that some readers liked my story."

Anguish and Horror

Fred Anger, of Berkeley, California, writes: "Have consumed with the usual amount of ardor the March copy of WT and have a few remarks I would like to air. Kline's *Lord of the Lamia* outshines 'em all and of course is first on the voting list. If the next installment is half as good I'll certainly not register any kicks. I was fairly petrified with anguish and horror when I saw that Bloch's *The Feast in the Abbey* ran tie for first place. This fact only goes to prove the old adage that some people are born crazy and others get that way. *Clutching Hands of Death* was not so hot as I expected, and I feel rather bad about it. The story was hackneyed, and it so closely resembled Quinn's recent *Hands of the Dead* that I remarked that you would print two such similar tales in rapid succession. *Rulers of the Future* finished its three months second-best."

Two Fine Stories

L. K. Leftwich, of Inglewood, California, writes: "I don't as a rule write letters to magazines but I must tell you about the two stories I enjoyed most in 1934 in your magazine. One was Dyalhis' *The Sapphire Goddess* and the other was *Thundering Worlds,* whose author I have forgotten. [The author was Edmond Hamilton.—THE EDITOR.] I have read those two stories till I have fairly worn out the magazines they were in. The Northwest Smith stories are good—I mean they are next; then Jirel, and then—not much. You see, I don't like the kind where blood and bones are piled on more bones and blood. I much prefer the actively supernatural or the interspatial sort. I don't like to be too critical, and after all, WEIRD TALES has been the only magazine of its type that I've been able to keep on reading for more than two or three months. Since I can't write weird stories myself, I'll have to be grateful for what I can get; and I suppose, say six stories I like, is a pretty high average after all."

A Sweet, Pleasant Plot

Henry Kuttner, of Hollywood, California, writes: "Your March issue is the best for a long, long time. Best story was the short-short, *What Waits in Darkness* by Loretta Burrough. Second best is C. L. Moore's yarn. I note especially the great part adjectives play in Moore's stories. Oddly, while they help achieve a weird effect, I chose Burrough's story for the simple, direct manner in which the good story was told. There was not a poor story in the issue. Kline's came last in my estimation; oriental stories are not weird, in my opinion. . . . Parker White had a nice poem in the issue; and the reprint was very good, although not from the old WT issues. *Clutching Hands of Death* was old stuff, but well handled, and I liked especially the neat way the author tied up the vengeance on the surgeon at the denouement. Too, Ernst's *Rulers of the Future* was a pleasant surprize, for Bernal's *Vampires of the Moon* had about destroyed my taste for weird-scientific stories. But Ernst had an unusually vivid and realistic story, bringing me back to the dear dead days when science-fiction first became popular. . . . I have often wondered why more writers haven't used Arabian Nights incidents for their stories, as Searight does in his sealed casket story (the story of the fisherman who released the *efrit* from the bottle). There is a wealth of top-notch material waiting to be converted into modern stories, as Cahill did with an old legend in his recent yarn, *Charon.* Maybe I'll write one myself and send it to you. After all, C. L. Moore was your 'find' for 1934, and you'll need a new find for the new year, won't you? Speaking of stories, here's one Mary Elizabeth Counselman should be able to write very nicely. A man is shipwrecked on a desert island, where there is potable water but no food. Desperate, he amputates his arms, then his legs, nibbles away until he is rescued or until there is nothing left to nibble. That should make Mr. Bloch envious!" [Ugh!—THE EDITOR.]

The Psychological Story

Mrs. E. W. Murphy, of Washington, D. C., writes: "I particularly want to put in my vote for *What Waits in Darkness*, by Loretta Burrough. My whole vote is for it, and for the development of the psychological story. In the first place, it gives the hardest of all things to find—something new again. All these years . . . I have bought WT as the treat of the month. And as time passed, I found, quite naturally, that it took more variety to please me, and more to surprize me. I have gotten so that I am even a little tired of the Old Ones, the whole family of them; and I am sincerely sorry, because so many of the best writers write about them. An exception is the Northwest Smith series; when Northwest encounters an elder race, it is not a formless, dark mind or a weird beast, but it is something unique. I meditated on the charm of the face laid out in a rectangular pattern, and the responsively glowing hair, for days. . . . To me, the really weird has to look not so weird. In *What Waits in Darkness*, perfect art and perfect mastery of theme were displayed. The familiar commonplace atmosphere, into which intruded a black horror from the mind of a really nice, well-meaning wife—that was truly exquisitely done. I am going to look and look, and hope and hope, for a long future line of such stories in WT. It is, to me, like finding a new lode in a good old mine."

Moore and Lovecraft

Lacy L. Harold, of Portsmouth, Ohio, writes: "This is my first letter to the Eyrie, although I have been a constant reader of WEIRD TALES for some twelve years or so. I ran across the magazine about the third or fourth copy that was published, and since then I have missed only one copy. . . . Your new author, C. L. Moore, has certainly got what it takes to put over a weird tale. His latest, *Julhi*, is to my mind by far the best of his work to date. I think his Northwest Smith stories are much better than those about Jirel of Joiry. *Shambleau*, *Black Thirst* and *Scarlet Dream* were so much better than either *The Black God's Kiss* or *Black God's Shadow* that there is no comparison. And that is strange, too, for ordinarily I don't care much for the interplanetary type of stories. I much prefer those of horror, strange doom, vampires, and

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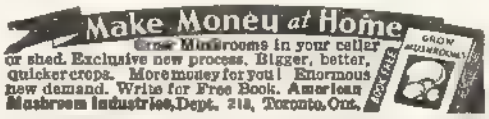

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especially those of elder evils, such as H. P. Lovecraft writes. Lovecraft is my favorite author, or has been until the advent of C. L. Moore. But Lovecraft has established himself so securely by his years of consistent fine work that Moore will have to hold up as well and for quite a while before he can supplant Lovecraft. Lovecraft's first story to strike my fancy was *The Hound*, and then *The Rats in the Walls*. Both of these were masterpieces of weird literature, followed by *Pickman's Model, The Call of Cthulhu*, and one after another so full of cosmic horror and creepy suspense that in my poor opinion he can not be surpassed. . . . Bram Stoker, Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe will have to look to their laurels, horror stories have improved so greatly since their time. And this is due a good bit, I think, to WEIRD TALES magazine."

Seconding Mr. Reynolds' Suggestion

G. H. January, of Memphis, Tennessee, writes: "Say, that was a great idea voiced by B. M. Reynolds in the February issue. Why not have a nation-wide poll among your readers as to the twelve best stories that have appeared in WEIRD TALES to date? Whew! I'd have to think a long time before deciding, but I'm certain, however, that A. Merritt's *The Woman of the Wood* and Seabury Quinn's *The Phantom Farmhouse* would be foremost among my selections. How many of your readers can remember that grand little story by Ralph Milne Farley, *Abductor Minimi Digit?* 'Twas great!"

Exceptionally Good Issue

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The March WEIRD TALES proved to be exceptionally good, coming as it did after a rather mediocre February issue. And I want to say, here and now, that if Robert Bloch ever turns out a story that will rate even one-half as good as Robert E. Howard's latest, *Jewels of Gwahlur*, I will take off my hat to him and concede him a master of the weird story. Howard certainly deserves plenty of credit for that tale. As usual, C. L. Moore gave us a very remarkable story in *Julhi*. That author's imagination seems boundless and the style of writing is peerless. It was with regret that I came to the end of *Rulers of the Future* by Paul Ernst, as that was the best he has ever written. Otis Adelbert Kline's *Lord of the Lamia* promises to come well up to the high standard we have come to expect from him. The only weak links were *What Waits in Darkness* and Stoker's reprint, *The Judge's House*, which was dry and written in the uninteresting style of half a century ago. His stories might have pleased our ancestors, but I doubt their ability to supply so much as a shiver to the thrill-hardened readers of the present."

Brief Comments

Henry Hasse, of Indianapolis, writes: "*The Dinner Set* by Fanny Kemble Johnson is a classic; one you should reprint in 1947. Without further ado, I vote it the best story in the February WT. It will lose out, though; the very short stories, classics though some of them are, never get the votes that the longer ones do."

LaMarr Chapman, of San Angelo, Texas, writes: "I don't like Quinn's new hero, Thomas Carter. I want Jules de Grandin back." [You'll get him back shortly in a story called *The Black Orchid*.—THE EDITOR.]

Miss Madaliene Cash, of Mechanic Falls, Maine, writes: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for a long, long time and like it very much, particularly the reprints and the stories by C. L. Moore. More power to you! As long as it is as good as at present I won't pass it up."

M. E. Thomas, of Indianapolis, writes: "If C. L. Moore of *Shambleau* fame ever assembles his stories in a book, I'll be one of the first customers. He's in a class by himself. C. A. Smith is grand, too, if he'd only get over the idea he's an artist. Whoever it was who compared his unspeakable demons to Doctor Suess's Flit ads had the right idea."

February Issue a Corker

E. L. Mengshoel, of Minneapolis, writes: "By the Immortal Beard of the Prophet! Your February issue is what you Americans so reverently call a 'corker'. Not merely because it appealed to my 50 pct. Romany nature but the fact that the dominant note in its rhapsody was orientalism; for the most outstanding stories in that issue had an east-

ward trend, suggesting Arabian, Hindoo and Ethiopian mysticism. But, in fact, every story in that ensemble was a square hit, each in its own way. Shall I name the one which, to my mind, took the foremost place, then I'm inclined to hand it to Seabury Quinn's *The Web of Living Death*. However, I am not quite ready to acknowledge the adequacy of that detective Carter, with all his incredible nonchalance and inexhaustible supply of American slang, as a substitute for Jules de Grandin, even in spite of his downright impossible feat of strength and nerve in carrying, wrapped up in a cloak, a python weighing 250 pounds besides the additional weights of the two guards that it had just swallowed. But none of the other stories, long or short, were far behind this in interest. *The Silver Bullet*, by Phyllis A. Whitney, was very impressive in its thoroughly weird atmosphere and vivid picturing of the milieu. Robert Howard's *The Grisly Horror*, with its black voodooism and oriental demonolatry, Frank Belknap Long's *The Body-Masters*, and Paul Ernst's *Rulers of the Future*—all were superb; though of course, the last named is 'all wet' in regard to human or animal or any kind of life on this earth several million years hence. Every one of the short stories, as well as the reprint, was absorbing. And Edmond Hamilton was a real surprize this time. His *Murder in the Grave* was by far the best that I have seen from his pen. . . . His psychological depicting of the voluntary burial-faker's sensations with the rattler as a bedfellow in his coffin was masterful."

A Cover Story Contest

Good old Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes to the Eyrie: "I could say that the March issue of WEIRD TALES is the best you have put out, but I won't. I could also say that it is the worst you have put out, but I won't. I will say that it was a mighty enjoyable issue. Imagine an entire issue written by C. L. Moore. What an issue that would be! Anyway *Julhi* was great reading. One of the author's best, in fact. How about an 80,000-word novel, C. L. Moore? It is rare to be able to class a reprint so high, but *The Judge's House* by Bram Stoker is well deserving of second place. It's one of the few good reprints you've had in ages. (I don't class reprints from past issues of WEIRD

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TALES among the other stories.) *Lord of the Lamia* starts off interestingly. You *would* stretch it out to three parts. The rest of the stories were nice reading also; *Jewels of Gwahlur* being one of the best of the Conan tales. Welcome back, Joseph Doolin; don't go away again. Let's have a cover story contest. Have a cover painted that does not illustrate a story, but portrays a weird scene that the fans can write a story around. Cash prizes can be given for the best stories, and honorable mentions can be paid for at the usual rates. Who knows but that you might discover new Lovecrafts and C. L. Moores?" [How about it? Do the rest of you want such a cover story contest?—THE EDITOR.]

A Few Dislikes

Carl A. Butz, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, writes, in part: "I don't care for C. L. Moore and I don't like interplanetary stories. They invariably follow a set formula, they duplicate on interstellar worlds the familiar atmosphere of earth, and they are not weird. I doubt whether they appeal to anyone above the mental age of twelve years. After all, why compete with the funny papers? My dislike of Moore probably demonstrates my lack of taste, but I much prefer Howard. For one thing, I don't care for metaphysics and psychological obscurities mixed up with brain vampires, soul vampires, primeval slime and endless descriptions of beautiful women."

Comments from an Author

Clark Ashton Smith writes from his home in Auburn, California: "Among the stories in the March WT, I really liked the Bram Stoker reprint and the little horror by Searight as well as any. Kline's serial begins rather enticingly, and has a fine title. In reading over the Eyrie, I was surprized by the paucity of mention given to the reprint of *The Supreme Witch,* which seemed better to me than most of the new stories in the same issue. Lovecraft's *The Music of Erich Zann* should have drawn more attention, too. . . . Well I recall Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow,* which seems to have taken much of its nomenclature from Bierce. I wish *The Yellow Sign* could be reprinted in WT." [A good suggestion, this.—THE EDITOR.]

Your Favorite Story

Readers, which story do you like best in this issue? Write us a letter, or fill out the vote coupon on this page, and mail it to the Eyrie, in care of WEIRD TALES. The most popular story in the March issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the concluding installment of Paul Ernst's weird-scientific story, *Rulers of the Future.*

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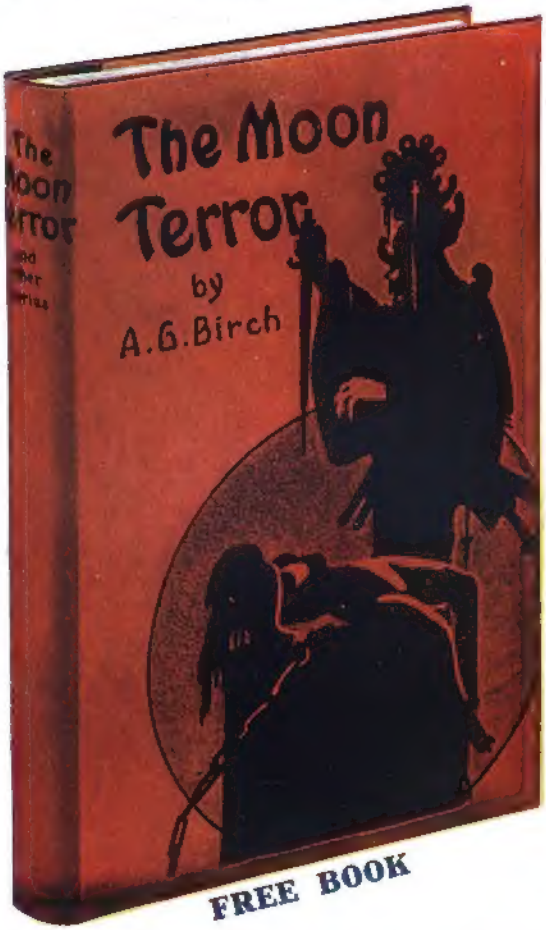

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